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ABSTRACT

Town meetings or public forums arranged to discuss issues of interest to citizens are as old as the settling of the United States, and they continue today as part of the democratic system. The Public Agenda Foundation maintains this tradition through a special series of community forums, known as the National Issues Forums (NIF), that annually address three common issues of widespread public concern. Drawing from the writings of past and present democratic advocates and critics, this NIF book examines democracy and its principles to aid forum participants in becoming more effective citizens. Chapter 1 presents the history of town meetings and, chapter 2 examines the theories of democracy. Chapter 3 reflects on individual and public participation as it defines public, public interest, and private identity. The political dialogue that occurs in forums is called public talk, and the use of public talk to make choices is the focus of chapter 4. Chapter 5 considers the role of public talk in the community, while chapter 6 discusses the participatory role of the NIF in national and local policymaking. A 10-page bibliography is included. (DJC)

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THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY

A SOURCE BOOK
for use with
NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

Our constitution ... favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. ... Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for, unlike any other nation, [we regard] him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless,... and instead of evoking discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any action at all.

—Pericles
430 B.C.

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WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK?

Who Wants Me to Know?

Looking at a National Issues Forums issue book, a Forum participant asked rather suspiciously, "Who wants me to know this?" That succinct question housed several more detailed questions inside it: "Who is behind this program? What are the National Issues Forums?" These are all good questions that deserve an answer.

Throughout the nation, many local civic and educational organizations have, as a part of their own program, a special series of community forums known as National Issues Forums. Each year these Forums address three common issues of widespread public concern. The issues are "national" in that they are important to local communities throughout the country. Organizations using the National Issues Forums (NIF) approach to policy discussions include colleges, universities, and schools; libraries and leagues; churches, synagogues, and theological centers; literacy programs and leadership programs; student associations and senior citizen centers. The participants are not just "policy junkies" but the fullest array of citizens. Each organization proceeds in an independent fashion to adapt the Forums to its own institutional objectives. In that sense there is no one Forum; there are many Forums, all locally controlled and financed.

These Forums are modern descendants of the American town meetings, our oldest political institution. They are also an effort to develop a new, better model for the public to use in learning the public's business.

What is common to the diverse organizations in the network is this desire to improve on the tradition of town meetings. The Forums' common model for public policy education is reflected in the NIF issue books, which are prepared by the Public Agenda Foundation (a nonpartisan research foundation). This model is one in which citizens "work through" hard choices on policy issues together — moving from first opinions to more reflective judgments as they search for acceptable common ground.

The Democratic Issues behind the Policy Issues

The NIF issue books treat such pressing matters as economic competitiveness, health care, national security, federal spending, taxes, and welfare. In discussing these policy issues the Forums bring to the surface the most basic questions about American democracy. It is very difficult to examine policy issues without raising questions about how policy matters are decided. So the second level of conversation at the Forums inevitably concerns how our democracy works — or doesn't work — and the role "We the People" play in it. This book is about the democratic issues behind all policy issues of the Forums, and it is designed to help leaders of the Forums respond to these issues behind the issues.

Often, the questions you will hear at Forums are framed in personal terms: "I already know what I think, why should I join in a Forum?" "Do the Forums really make a difference?" But these personal questions really reflect basic conceptual issues. For example, someone who asks if the Forums make a difference is raising a fundamental question about individual participation in a democracy. The person might have asked, "How can one person hope to be effective in a large democracy?"

Fortunately, there have been several thousand years of commentary on the questions of citizenship in a democratic society. That commentary fills hundreds of volumes. In this book we have attempted to draw from the writings of the champions — and the critics — of democracy that speak to the questions you are likely to hear at the Forums. For example, the quotation from the Athenian statesman Pericles on the cover (it comes from Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War) speaks to what a democracy requires of people. This book owes a special debt not only to Pericles but also to our more immediate forebears, Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville, and to all the other authors, ancient and modern, who produced the ideas it draws upon.

An underlying objective of the Forums is to renew in people an understanding of the principles of democracy in a way that will lead to more effective citizenship. Neither the democracy of the American town meeting nor the concept of democracy

3

reflected in our Constitution has been the ultimately perfect form of democracy. Democracy is, at its best, creative, and its character evolves. As good as the precedents have been, no concept from another time and circumstance can be adequate for our own. We have to fashion our own understanding of democracy. The sources for this book were chosen because they shed light on the struggle to define a more perfect democratic union. For these purposes, the issue is not whether Pericles was a true democrat but how his words help us to develop our understanding of democracy. What is important is what we, in our generation, add to the evolving concept of a democratic society. Ultimately, the important conclusions are not others' — but our own.

This Is a USED Book

This book is intended to grow, just as our conversations about democracy should grow — deeper and richer. It grew to this form out of the responses of Forum leaders who raised the questions that framed the chapters and who helped shape the mass of readings from research files into a manageable volume. The book began with reams of democratic theory compiled by the Kettering Foundation, another research foundation that, together with the Public Agenda Foundation, designed the NIF model for policy forums. Then the literature was reviewed by people experienced in the Forums, people who were searching for concepts that would shed light on democratic issues generated by their discussions. The intent was not to produce a textbook covering all the nuances of democratic theory or all of the arguments of an author. The purpose was to find commentary useful in responding to Forum participants' concerns. Drafts of this book were used by NIF moderators before they passed it along to you — to be used again.

That is why there are wide margins and a workbook format, so that you have space to write down your own reactions, questions, and references from your favorite authors. If you would like to share your experiences in using this book, please send your comments to the Kettering Foundation at 200 Commons Road,

Dayton, Ohio, 45459-2799. The spirit of this book is very much that of a continuing conversation, and those in the National Issues Forums who have put their questions and favorite quotations in this edition would be pleased to hear from you.

What's Next?

The book begins with a brief history of public forums in the United States. In the second chapter, we look at some problems raised by the critics of democracy. This will help establish the broad context within which the National Issues Forums operate. The third chapter starts with a tough but commonly heard question, "Why participate?" It is another way of asking if the Forums make a difference. This question forces us to consider the way our political system operates and the role of the public in it. The chapter is about the one thing we hold in common with everyone else in this country — our citizenship. The fourth chapter is about how we relate to one another in a political community — specifically, how we talk and listen to one another. It describes the Forums' special design. The concluding chapters deal with how the public functions as a democratic community and the relation of this democratic community to democratic government.

By and large, the readings in this book, like the Forums, take the point of view that the public is real and a source of real power in our society. But there is no presumption that the public is automatically good or that it will always exercise its power wisely. Precisely because that is not assumed, the selections concentrate on what makes for a responsible and effective public. It is the *quality* of public involvement that is considered most important — not just the quantity of participation.

Throughout, you will find boxed quotations from a variety of sources. They illustrate major points in the text and display the range of views that shape our concepts of democracy. The following comment by Alexander Hamilton, for instance, calls attention to challenges that every generation faces in a democracy;

the challenges of being thoughtful and making wise choices. Jefferson is more often quoted on the role of the people, so it is interesting to see what Hamilton, usually considered the antithesis of Jefferson, said on the same subject.

Hamilton framed his thoughts as a question. He makes the point that what people do with a democracy is always an open issue:

> It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.
>
> —Alexander Hamilton[1]

1 Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*, Number 1, p. 33.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is impossible to recognize the scores of people who helped produce this book. So many community Forum leaders and teachers read it, suggested revisions, added anecdotes from their experiences, and talked through the conceptual issues point by point for three years. And students in the classes of professors like Bob McKenzie and Craig Rimmerman reviewed successive versions of the text and wrote criticisms.

But it is not the theory that makes this book distinctive; it is the interaction between citizens and democratic ideas.

The book also owes a great deal to all of the staff and associates at the Kettering Foundation. No one escaped struggling with a draft — and some more than one. Megan Scribner responded to everyone's suggestions; she has shaped every line in this volume with two summers of superb editing. The research group at Kettering traced the sources, matched the literature to the questions, and gave the book an intellectual integrity. Michele Archie, Ted Wang, Jay Austin, Steve Mitchell and a long line of student assistants — Peter Levine, Jackie Scott, Cheryl Carr, and Maria Cissell — debated every idea with fine minds and a most admirable dedication. Like Maria Farland, who did the research on John Maverick and the town meetings, they left no citation unexamined. Pat Scully directed their work and presided over the most intense discussions of democratic ideas since those in the back rooms of Philadelphia in 1787. Debi Witte, the Foundation's librarian, kept us supplied with books. Betty Frecker was at her most diligent as copy editor.

When problems arose, Bernie Murchland rewrote entire chapters. Teachers like Larry McGehee and Jacques Downs edited early versions from cover to cover. Our senior editor, Harris Dienstfrey, also edited the book twice. Many of the scholars cited in the footnotes were personally involved in the evolution of this volume and lent their knowledge of democratic theory to the National Issues Forums.

This book was not written by a committee, but by a community. It was the greatest pleasure to be in that company.

D.M.

Chapter One

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC FORUM: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Early Town Meetings

The National Issues Forums — and the democratic issues that they raise — cannot be understood apart from what happened during the formative period of our political history. But there are many ways of writing this history. Some would begin with the explorers, others with colonization. Most would cite the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution or the drafting and ratification of the Constitution. What you will find in this chapter is a different story, one that tells about the public or pregovernmental origins of our democracy. And it is just that — a story, an interpretation of our history that emphasizes the role of the citizen.

This story begins in 1633, not 1787. And the father of our country in the story is not George Washington. It is a lesser-known citizen, John Maverick, whose name was first on a warrant calling for a meeting about a village fence.

The date is October of 1633 and the place is Dorchester, Massachusetts, just outside Boston. Dorchester has a grassy plain running down to the bay. It must have been an excellent place for livestock, cows and goats. But as often happens, and must have happened then, the animals went through the fences and onto the village green. That led to two problems: first, how to protect the green and second — the issue behind the issue — *how to decide* how to protect the green. In October of 1633 there was no local government in Dorchester to address these problems. There was not even an established forum for discussing public matters. The only precedent was for meetings in the church, but Sunday services were not the place to discuss such worldly matters as cows and goats.[1]

At this point, John Maverick, a minister, intervened. What he said has not been recorded, but we can easily imagine its substance. "We have a problem. We need to talk about it. Let's meet on Monday." In school we are taught stirring phrases like, "Give me liberty or give me death." But what John Maverick said: "We have a problem; let's talk about it." — should go down in our history as the quintessential American political speech. Nearly everyone in the country has heard it and has repeated it one time or another.

What made this incident into a political tradition was that the colonists met every month, not just when the cows got out. These meetings led to an institution that became a foundation of America's political system — the town meeting.

These town meetings did the governing. The colonists did not adopt what might have been expected, the municipal form of government they had in England. Instead, they ran the colony by the town meetings. The meetings had no authority behind them other than the power that came from the mutual promises of one person to another to work together. These "civic bodies politic" were voluntary associations. The common endeavors, which began in talking together in the meetings, created power and then maintained it by means of covenants among people.[2]

The democratic impulse behind these meetings is illustrated by their inclusivensess: they were not limited just to those who were eligible to vote in government elections. Voting eligibility in the seventeenth century was quite restricted. The town meetings, on the other hand, were more open. Property ownership, for example, was rarely a prerequisite for inclusion. Even common "debtors and laborers" often participated.[3] Most importantly, the town meetings did not deal exclusively with problems of governing — as in the uses of the greens. They served more basic public purposes. They were forums for people to define common, shared interests.

This is not to say that the town meetings were perfect. Attendance was sometimes poor. They did not always promote free expression. Dissenters like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson could be banished. The town meetings reflected all the limitations of Puritanism.[4]

The point that is important here — that leads us to see a connection between these early town meetings and the new sort of town meetings, in the National Issues Forums — is that the meetings did not begin as formal institutions of the colonial government; they were *public* institutions. The public preceded the government in this country. The difference between the civic bodies politic — the public — and the government can be seen in their disagreements with each other. The complaint of William Shirley, colonial governor of Massachusetts from 1731 to 1760, is a good illustration. With irritation he wrote that a Boston town might call a meeting "upon the Petition of ten of the meanest Inhabitants, who by their constant attendance there generally are the majority and outvote the Gentlemen, Merchants, Substantial Traders, and all the better part of the Inhabitants; to whom it is Irksome to attend at such meetings...."[5]

These days, people ask if policymakers pay any attention to public forums when all that happens there is "talk." It is clear from Governor Shirley's reaction that the first policymakers paid a great deal of attention to public forums. These early officials regarded the town meeting talk as so important that they tried to suppress the assemblies. But despite such suppression, perhaps even because of it, the town meetings and their tradition of public discussion survived — and for good reason. In Boston, the town meeting was the only legal forum people had for expressing their views.[6]

Throughout the colonies, town meetings served another important purpose. They developed a new kind of leadership that would be essential to the Revolution and the framing of the Constitution. Schooled in the principles of town meeting democracy, leaders like Samuel Adams and John Adams emerged to take the reins of a new nation.

Schooled to a strong civic-mindedness, everyone who participated contributed to an American tradition of public talk, which citizens defended by continuing to talk.

Public Forums, the Revolution, and the Constitution

In time, the towns of Massachusetts and other colonies became a network for political action. This network was organized in 1772 when Samuel Adams established a 21-member "committee of correspondence" to create ties to other towns and explain the colonists' position "to the world." The practice was so appealing that within 15 months all but two of the colonies had established their own committees of correspondence. In this way, the tradition of talk in the town meetings grew even stronger. And the practice of uniting the small towns and drawing authority from the people through them set a powerful political precedent.[7]

By the time of the Revolution, the public debate, reflected in the Congress of 1776, turned to the question of whether a war for independence could be successful against what was then the world's greatest superpower. John Adams, from the town meetings of Braintree, took on the task of defending the proposed Declaration. (He might be thought of as a pioneer NIF moderator.) Adams' faith in the Revolution was grounded in what he had learned about people and the power of their "public halls." To those who feared failure in the Revolution he replied:

> *But we shall not fail. The cause will raise up armies; the cause will create navies. The people, the people, if we are true to them, will carry us, and will carry themselves, gloriously, through this struggle. I care not how fickle other people have been found. I know the people of these Colonies....*[8]

Thomas Jefferson recalled that "the vigour given to our revolution in its commencement" had been rooted in such "little republics" as the townships. He believed that these "little republics" had "thrown the whole nation into energetic action."[9] The public talk they made possible also provided the needed time for

reflection. It was an antidote to hasty reactions. John Adams, in a letter to his wife in 1776, wrote:

> *Time has been given for the whole People, maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their Judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing it in News Papers and Pamphletts, by debating it, in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private Conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the thirteen, have now adopted it, as their own Act. — This will cement the Union, and avoid those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned, by such a Declaration Six Months ago.*[10]

After waging war for independence, the former colonists began writing the documents of self-government. If the king were no longer the authority for the government, who was? The same town meetings that had played such a decisive role in the Revolution had a very clear answer to the question of who was in charge: the people of the town meetings were in charge.

The continuing power of the meetings is clearly seen in the history of the Massachusetts Constitution, which was a precursor of the United States Constitution. After the Revolution, the Massachusetts General Court attempted to write a constitution for the state. But the people in the town meetings rejected it, sent it back, and only after it was redrafted and then debated in the meetings, literally line by line, did the people of the state adopt it.[11] There were discussions and votes at every step, not only on whether the proposed constitution was valid, but also on whether the General Court should have the authority to draft it. "... The people

literally came together and decided what powers [they] wanted government to have...."[12] Their actions gave validity to Thomas Paine's observation that "*a constitution is not the act of a government, but of a people constituting a government.*"[13]

The role of the people in constitution-making — the role of extended *public* deliberation — may be crucial. Consider the host of democratic constitutions that were written in Europe and in former colonial domains after the First World War. However much these new constitutions resembled the U. S. Constitution, however expert they were in detail, they were nonetheless imposed by government. They had not emerged from the rough-and-tumble of serious public scrutiny, and they produced relatively weak democracies.[14]

The strength of the town meetings became the strength of the U. S. Constitution. Our Constitution is very similar to the one that John Adams helped write the second time for Massachusetts. The town meetings led to a national Constitution unique among democratic constitutions in that it was created by talk and — when the Bill of Rights was added — explicitly protected talk: in the right to assemble and to speak freely.

The Little Republics and the Big Republic: The Town Meeting Tradition in the Age of National Democracy

Some think of the adoption of the Constitution as the end of direct democracy — the democracy expressed in the little republics of the town meetings — and the beginning of big, indirect, representative democracy. But perhaps little republics and the big republic are not opposites: perhaps they are interdependent. Jefferson, you recall, believed that the little republics, with their traditions of talk, made the big republic possible. Americans may have combined in practice two elements of government that appear contradictory in theory, government by direct vote (plebiscite) and government through representation.[15] Town meeting democracy may be more than a museum piece; it may need modern forms that can attend to a

question the Constitution left unanswered. The Constitution recognized the power of the public as sovereign. But the unanswered question was, how was the public to exercise that power?

What the public needs to exercise its power as citizens are the institutions of citizenry — the town meetings — the little republics.[16] Rights with no capacity to exercise them are no rights at all. A Forum moderator observed that while the Constitution recognized the people's right to participate, such a right was only an abstraction if they never learned to exercise it — as she hoped people were doing in the Forums.[17] She was also echoing Thomas Jefferson who, three decades after the Constitution had been adopted, encouraged the spread of the town meeting through what he called the ward system:

> *The voice of the whole people would be thus fairly, fully, and peaceably expressed, discussed, and decided by the common reason of the society. If this avenue be shut to the call of sufferance, it will make itself heard through that of force, and we shall go on, as other nations are doing, in the endless circle of oppression, rebellion, reformation; ... again; and so on forever.*[18]

Fortunately, the New England town meeting, which did not survive as the principal means of governing, did survive in a thousand different kinds of forums which spread throughout the country. Since 1787 they have helped keep our constitutional system alive by keeping public talk alive — not just in the city councils or the legislatures but locally in the public assemblies of the "little republics." Leonard P. Oliver's *The Art of Citizenship* recalls the history that brought the town meetings to our own era. Except where noted, the following account is adapted from his study.[19]

In the 1800s, during the period when both free public education and universal male suffrage were being accepted, Josiah Holbrook introduced a new way of

using forums — as a means of civic education. His Lyceum Movement was the first systematic attempt to create a formalized structure for voluntary citizen education in every part of the nation. Holbrook wanted to establish lyceums, or adult learning centers, in every town so citizens could discuss topics of mutual interest and pool their resources for self- and community-improvement. Lyceums flourished in the early 1830s. The National American Lyceum was organized in 1831, and by 1835 the movement included an estimated 3,000 towns, 100 counties, and 16 state lyceums, all run democratically by local citizens. However, the movement was hurt badly by the financial panic of 1837-1843, the growing slavery controversy, and also by increasing competition from professional lecturers. It declined, then all but disappeared.

The lyceum idea was revived after the Civil War in the Chautauqua Assembly and the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle launched in 1874 by a Methodist clergyman, the Reverend John Vincent, on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in New York. Originally, he had in mind secular education for Sunday school teachers, but his effort came to foster a 40-year-long movement of popular adult education encompassing at its peak, in 1895, nationwide correspondence study and 15,000 "home study circles" for group discussion of social, economic, and political ideas. Vincent wanted, through education, to increase informed popular influence on politics in ways that would help solve the pressing social problems of the day. The Chautauqua study circles, artistic performances, and public lectures on contemporary issues helped to raise the consciousness of citizens in small towns across the country and to pave the way for the new ideas on social, economic, and political policy that were associated with the Progressive and New Deal periods.

A variety of vehicles for public discussion of policy issues grew up in the Progressive Era. One was university extension programs, transplanted from England in the 1880s. In the early 1900s, University of Wisconsin President Charles Von Hise established the model for statewide educational programs conducted by the land grant colleges. The passage of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1914, authorizing the Cooperative Extension Service to promote better rural citizenship as well as better farming, for the first time provided federal government funds for forums. In

addition, private organizations like the social worker Jane Addams' settlement house network in Chicago and various organizational manifestations of the Progressive movement, such as women's clubs and later the League of Women Voters, vigorously expanded informed popular participation in government.

In the years immediately preceding World War I another local forum took on national dimensions. The lectures on public issues at Ford Hall in Boston were imitated across the country, leading to Ford Hall's Open Forum National Council. The council brought diverse local discussion forums, some 200 organizations in all, into a national system. World War I ended the program. Most of the local organizations were discontinued as the country mobilized for the war, and the national forum movement collapsed.

The concept did not receive substantial public attention again until the Great Depression, which triggered two national forum movements almost simultaneously: the Studebaker Forums (1932-1940), and the U. S. Department of Agriculture's "Schools of Philosophy" and Farmer Discussion Forums (1935-1940). Both were inspired by perceived threats to the American economy.

Also, before World War II, one of the most interesting of the American forum movements was the national "Town Meeting of the Air." The NBC broadcast of this radio program aired debates among experts. The informed were given opportunities to inform; the general public was to listen and learn. Topics ranged from the relative merits of democracy, fascism, and socialism, to questions of how to eliminate crime.

In a book on the program, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, there is a revealing discussion of how democracy was understood in 1938. The central purpose of the program was to improve the reasoning abilities of an informed minority of citizens. The means to this end was called "discussion," but the rules for good discussion were actually rules for fair argumentation. Stereotyping opponents, *ad hominem* arguments, and vague generalizations were denounced. These rules constituted a model of deliberation, which was used by the discussion clubs that grew up around the radio program. [20]

The social objective of the program, according to its originator, George Denny, was to get neighbors to listen to one another in a nation that had grown "citified" and "industrialized." There was a sense of an imperative to revitalize American democracy to face the growing threat from the fallen democracies in Germany and Italy which had turned into dictatorships.[21]

An enthusiastic response from one listener is testimony to the sense in which democracy was thought of as a form of political competition, a competition made entertaining by the media:

> *Boy oh Boy! That "Capitalism vs. Cooperativism" was a hummer! The best yet! My quiet study was just thick with flying fur — and I liked it!*
>
> *Let's have more of this kind of educational entertainment which makes us better citizens through greater knowledge.*
>
> *Please send me copies of the addresses of the evening of January 9th and buy the George Washington Bridge with the balance of the enclosed dollar.*[22]

More recently, citizenship education has been promoted by activist organizations. For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, Citizenship Schools were centered in another Dorchester — this one in Georgia. The aims of the schools were to develop local leadership and increase black voter turnout in the South. However, the schools soon became more than voter registration classes; they became places where the responsibilities and values of citizenship were discussed.

The forum tradition is alive today in educational and civic organizations of the kind in the NIF network. People have continued public forums in the latter part of the twentieth century for reasons much like those that motivated the first participants in the town meetings — the need to bind ourselves together.

Public Imperatives and the National Issues Forums

The need today is not to bring civic order to a colonial frontier. Nor do we have to plan a revolt from a monarchy. The test of democracy now is to keep it vital under a very different set of circumstances. We have to blend thousands of divergent interests and points of view into a common sense of direction for our communities and for the country. We have to know not just what *I* think and want but what *we* think we can and should do. The only way to do that seems to be by talking to one another.

In the early twentieth century Woodrow Wilson pointed to this imperative, and the significance of public forums, when he wrote:

> *We must learn... to meet, as our fathers did.... There must be discussion and debate, in which all freely participate.... The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another.... For only [then]... can the general interests of a great people be compounded into a policy suitable to all.*[23]

As Wilson was suggesting, the sovereignty of the people, the basis for our Constitution, is not just an abstraction. "We the People" did, in fact, ordain and establish the country and the Constitution. The American public first created itself in the town meetings, and then, more than a century later, it created the nation and its government. That same public, Woodrow Wilson and others believed, had to continue to convene itself. Popular sovereignty had to be continuous. Otherwise we would become dependent, if not on George III, then on some other single individual.

The responsibility to hold counsel with one another in order to define the general interest of the people remains what Elliot Richardson, the former United States

Attorney General and holder of more Cabinet offices than anyone else in modern times, described as the public's *undelegable duties:*

> *Although we the people have delegated limited responsibilities to those who hold public office in the interest of all of us, we, nevertheless, retain ultimate responsibility. We cannot delegate it; it belongs to us. We may fulfill it well or poorly, but still we have it.*[24]

Richardson, speaking in 1986 at the NIF conference at the Ford Presidential Library, went on to say:

> *I am convinced that the very existence of ... the National Issues Forum, in which so many people ... have participated, does represent a constructive response to the problem of how to involve citizens in a deeper understanding of the issues that concern them.*[25]

The National Issues Forums take responsibility for the kind of public deliberations that are the prerequisite to governing democratically. They are serious about the serious public talk they promote. The Forums continue the effort to enable "the voice of the whole people...[to be] fairly, fully, and peaceably expressed." But public talk is not easy; it is difficult. It requires deep thinking and careful listening, in the process of reaching shared judgments and making tough choices. Like Pericles, the Forums operate on the thesis that discussion is not a stumbling block in the way of action, but rather "an indispensable preliminary to any action at all." The Forums reflect a conviction that all democracies depend on conversation and that the quality of those conversations is directly related to the quality of the democracy.

The moral of the story in this chapter is that people continue to exercise their proper sovereignty when they take responsibility for their public talk.

1 Dorchester Antiquarian and Historical Society, *History of the Town of Dorchester, Massachusetts*, pp. 30-33; Maude Pinney Kuhns, *The "Mary and John": A Story of the Founding of Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1630;* and James H. Stark, *Dorchester Day: Celebration of the Two Hundred and Seventy-Ninth Anniversary of the Settlement of Dorchester.*

2 John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, p. 54. See also Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 176.

3 Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780*, pp. 78-99. On the other hand, where town meetings were created as instruments of government authority, as they were in colonial Connecticut, they never played the role of purely public bodies. See Bruce C. Daniels, *The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development, 1635-1790*, pp. 64-93.

4 Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 19.

5 Newton Edwards and Herman G. Richey, *The School in the American Social Order*, pp. 83-84. As cited in Leonard P. Oliver, *The Art of Citizenship: Public Issue Forums*, p. 7.

6 Gerard B. Warden, "Boston Politics, 1672-1765."

7 Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts.*

8 *The Works of Daniel Webster*, Vol. 1, p. 135.

9 Thomas Jefferson. As quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 251.

10 L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family*, p.142.

11 Robert J. Taylor, ed., *Massachusetts, Colony to Commonwealth: Documents on the Formation of Its Constitution, 1775-1780*, Introduction.

12 Elliot Richardson, "We Delegated Our Powers," p. 2.

13 Thomas Paine. As quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 145.

14 Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 144-145.

15 Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts.*

16 Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 238-258.

17 Most of the quotes and stories attributed to "Forum leaders" came out of two seminars in which NIF convenors and moderators talked with each other and with a number of political theorists about the ideas presented in earlier drafts of this manuscript. The seminars were held at the Spring Hill Conference Center in Wayzata, Minnesota (June 15-20, 1986), and at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio (July 8-10, 1987).

18 Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, p. 1403.

19 Oliver, *The Art of Citizenship*, pp. 5-8.

20 Harry A. Overstreet, and Bonaro W. Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, pp. 30-36.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-6.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

23 Woodrow Wilson, Campaign Address, 1912.

24 Richardson, "We Delegated Our Powers," p. 3.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Chapter Two

QUESTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

The Maverick story brings out all kinds of reactions to democracy. Some respond by asking if the purpose of the story is to prove that we can run the country today by town meetings. Certainly not. But that response captures a sense that the "story" is just that, a tale about an ideal that cannot exist in the real world. Many critics challenge democratic practices and concepts because they consider democracy a myth.

One of the reasons that democracy attracts such criticisms may be that people think of democracy not simply as a theoretical scheme for governing, but also as a way of life. As a way of life, democracy touches on all that we hope for in others and all that we want in a good society. It embodies political concepts we hold dear: freedom, equity, justice. Yet when people compare their perception of life as it is with the ideal of democracy, they are sometimes disappointed. The more people see corruption, the misuse of power, the triumph of what they consider evil over what they consider good, the greater is their tendency to see democratic ideals as unrealized. One response to unrealized ideals is to say that they are unrealizable — in other words, to say that democracy is a myth.

No book about the practice of democracy, no book about the National Issues Forums, can ignore such misgivings, which have been raised as often by democracy's defenders as by its detractors! Democracy is not a perfect form of government. It has problems that must be addressed realistically. Democracy, given the importance it attaches to reason, never can be an uncritical faith. Whether explicit in critiques of democracy as a theoretical scheme of governance, or implicit in people's comments about their personal experiences, the questions about democracy need to be put on the table so that we can look at the reasons behind them.

Types of Democracy

Democracy may have begun as a response to the problems that arose when states were ruled by oligarchies. The principal problem it sought to address was the arbitrary rule by a self-serving elite, or worse, dictator. The remedies that democracy proposed led to the characteristic four elements of classical democracy. These elements were:

- *Public deliberation* to establish power. "We teach ourselves through talk," Pericles said in describing Athenian democracy.

- *Elections* to select leaders (by majority determination).

- *The diffusion of power* by having citizen officeholders with limited terms — and in some instances, the ostracism of those who were deemed to be too powerful.

- *Rule by laws*, that reflected the general or public interest and would serve as a further barrier to powerful leaders who might be disposed to arbitrary and self-serving actions.

There were certain corollaries that followed from this formula for self-government: Participation was a duty. The public had a right to speak freely and to assemble frequently. Information about public matters had to be open to the public. Secrecy was anathema. There had to be "demes" or wards, subunits of the government (or what we would call a civic structure) to accommodate the individual participation that democracy required. Each of these became a cardinal principle of democracy because each was essential for the democracy to function.

Classical democracy was also shaped by the prevailing mind-set about political life. The political community, the polis, was a means of achieving the good life and

realizing the ultimate in human potential. There was a premium placed on the common good.

When the political values shifted, later — when in the seventeenth century the individual, not the state, began to be the focus of politics, and individual well-being the test of a good society — classical democracy gave way to what is usually called "liberal" democracy. Individual interests or the common interests of groups of like-minded individuals (merchants, for example) had to be addressed. Democracy became more a representative form of government, in contrast to more direct classical democracy. And "representation," that is, having your interests represented in the political order, became a central issue. Each individual who had a place in ordinary life had to have a place in political life, or more precisely, each interest had to be represented in the political order. Every single merchant could not be a politician, but the interests of merchants had to be represented in all political deliberations.

Under these influences, democracy became a matter of fairly adjudicating among interests through the instrumentality of much larger, more highly structured forms of government.

There were, as you would expect, also corollaries to the new formula for democracy. Faction and parties replaced the more inclusive demes as a response to the need for people to be represented. The public became the organized public. Diversity was not simply to be tolerated, but celebrated. Pluralism eventually became a central virtue in multi-factioned, often multi-ethnic democracies. The competition that was inevitable with the decline of overriding and controlling visions of the common good (often interpreted through religions) also became a virtue. Democracy came to be identified with the individual freedom to self-determination. Naturally, a greater premium was placed on the freedom of choice and the right of dissent.

Our own democracy, American democracy, is an amalgam of both the classical and liberal traditions. For example, we still have a heritage of local, direct democracy and yet our national tradition is that of indirect or representative democracy. Now there is a debate over what form of democracy is best for

problems unique to our times. The power of the bureaucracy, for instance, is more an issue these days than the fear of oligarchies. Modern democracy does not seem to protect people from the arbitrary rules of local, state, or federal bureaucracies. The ability of bureaucracies to make rules that have the force of law — without following the democratic procedures for lawmaking — is troubling.

In the context of problems such as these, we are deciding what, from our various heritages, we should emphasize in fashioning a democracy suitable to our circumstances. What is important for the Forums, in whatever heritage we build upon, is the role of the public. Take the question of the nature of public participation. We could think of participation as a matter of expression. Or we could think of it as a matter of interaction.

Under the first definition, the emphasis would be on giving people a chance to exercise their voices: to speak out, to vote. The *quantity* of the participation — the number who voted, for example — would be the measure of our democratic health. But under the second definition, the emphasis would be on the *quality* of public interactions and on the opportunities to talk and think together.

There is an excellent discussion of these two very different understandings of democratic participation in Ralph Ketcham's *Individualism and Public Life*.[1] The assumption behind the first option, which might be called "expressive democracy," Ketcham explains, is that society is considered a diverse aggregation of interests and factions expressing those interests. That is the reason for the emphasis on "expression"; the duty of the state is to take into account all views and all interests. There is no problem if the perspectives are very individualistic and the interests are selfish; the state may even encourage the articulation of selfishness so that the public voice will be clearer and better understood. On the other hand, the assumption behind the second option, "interactive democracy," is that the purpose of political life is not just to fulfill individual ambitions but rather to create a good life in the community. Virtue is important. "I want to be proud of my city" was the explanation that a member of a community forum gave for her participation. Because this quest for the good life requires some definition of the public interest, deliberation is essential. Participation is also essential — but it is its quality that

holds the key to whether the common interest is well or poorly defined by the public.

This chapter deals with the problems of democracy and the questions of what form of democracy is best for us now. It begins with the most extreme argument: There is no form of democracy that is best for us; democracy is nothing but a myth.

Perpetuating the Democratic Myth?

The question of whether democracy is only an unrealizable ideal came from the experience of one Forum leader, who, in trying to encourage support for town meetings in her community, was stopped short with the challenge: "You are just trying to perpetuate the democratic myth." This is not, however, a new challenge. The question put to the Forum moderator has its basis in at least four recurring criticisms of democracy. Here they are in brief:

The first is that selfish self-interests are too powerful; the public is not up to the demands of democracy. The second is that oligarchies won the battle with democracies; elites control the government. The third is that the world is too complex for a form of government developed for small Greek city-states. And the fourth is that democracy is fatally flawed with defective concepts. Each one of these criticisms has a modern form, which a moderator is likely to encounter. So you might need to know a bit more about each of them.

The People Cannot Do the Job

This argument holds that while the Founders set forth a noble ideal, democracy was lost in practice because people simply were not up to its demands. We lost our democracy, these critics say, because we lacked the moral fiber to sustain a republican ethic. The Founders placed a high esteem on citizen virtue, and we have

come up short. Democratic ideals have been undermined by our hedonism, our materialism, and our selfishness.

A less-harsh version of this argument says that democracy can only be a myth because people think of themselves as members of professions or interest groups rather than as citizens. The eighteenth-century political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote: "We have physicists, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, painters; we no longer have citizens...."[2] The effect is to weaken our commitment to the common good. Political analyst Michael Walzer adds his own lament to Rousseau's:

> *Here in the United States we still do have citizens, but it is frequently said of them ... that their commitment to the political community is less profound than it once was, that there has been a decline of civic virtue and even of ordinary civility, and erosion of the moral and political qualities that make a good citizen.*[3]

Elites Rule

A second argument holds that the problem is not a lack of good citizens but rather domination by elites who manipulate the political system to their advantage. The system, in short, is rigged. Consider this representative observation:

> *In the US we have a method of formulating defense policy which is influenced by porkbarrel legislation, technological results of federally subsidized research and development, a desire to keep large corporations afloat, and interservice competition. We as citizens are not often involved*

in the formulation of policy beyond letting our representative know that jobs at General Dynamics or Rockwell are important to the local economy.[4]

A variation of this argument says that democracy can only be a myth because the system is unworkable without elites, who from this perspective are seen as the necessary guardians for democracy. The elitist assumption is that self-government is a pipe dream. Only a selected few, they argue, are capable of ruling and people do not have enough common sense to decide their own best interest. Pericles is reported to have said, "Although only a few may originate policy, we are all able to judge it."[5] The elitists say no.

Journalist and social analyst Walter Lippmann gave the bluntest formulation of the elitist position. The citizen, he argued, "lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct."[6] The public is a "phantom." Elites govern, not people. Citizens, Lippmann wrote in his book, *Public Opinion,* are like theatergoers who arrive in the middle of the third act and leave before the curtain. They have neither the capacity nor the interest to direct public affairs responsibly. The only role of citizens is to choose their leaders.

The elitist perspective is certainly not new. The idea that citizens need guardians is nearly as old as Western political thought. Plato clearly outlined this notion in his description of the benevolent guardians of his Republic. St. Thomas Aquinas shared this belief in a political hierarchy led by one man — just as he believed in a spiritual hierarchy headed by one God. He concluded: "every natural governance is governance by one."[7]

The social imperative that reinforces the case for guardians — one, or a small, elite group — is the need for virtue and common effort. Every community in which there is a Forum has a number of problems that require a shared sense of direction and cooperation. And more, addressing those problems requires a broad sense of public good, one not compromised by selfish interests. One way to ensure that the right actions are taken is to have a virtuous leader in charge. Any alternative seems to the guardians unthinkable. Absent any definition of a larger public good or any

common sense of direction, a country or a community is in danger of being immobilized by conflict. Thomas Hobbes described that worst of all political situations when he wrote:

> *It is manifest that, during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against man .... In such condition ... the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.*[8]

For Hobbes, preventing societies from degenerating into a war of the parts against the whole required guardian leaders with the power to overawe the masses and so ensure stability.

In this country, people who think of themselves as guardians have often been committed to certain selected American ideals — they become guardians to save America from itself. Our ideals, they believe, cannot be assured by democracy. They question popular discussion, not because it does not lead to an answer but because it might lead to the wrong answer. They believe that public talking is time-wasting public babble — or worse. For example, talking may reconfirm the public's deepest fears about the country's opponents and escalate conflict. They believe the public is unpredictable and therefore dangerous.

The guardians see the public as a baby who becomes upset and cries to alert its parental guardians. The "baby" public may know something is wrong, but it can provide no real solution, only cry out. From this perspective, a degree of citizen indifference is essential: The public needs to be as passive as possible; democracy could not work if everyone were interested in everything. Participation should not be overly encouraged; apathy keeps the uninformed masses from interfering in government.

The World Is Too Complex

A related set of arguments holds that even if people were able to control the system, circumstances would make a strong democracy impossible. Democracies are thought to work only for small, homogeneous populations. The world has grown too big, too diverse, too complex. Global forces govern our lives, severely compromising the conditions needed for democracy. The main argument here centers on science and technology, and was formulated well by Jacques Ellul, the arch-technophobe of our time. For him technology oppresses and robs us of our freedom even as it promises greater liberation for the human spirit. Ellul paints a chilling scenario that has influenced a great many people who think about the relationship between technology and society. Langdon Winner, for example, writes in his *Autonomous Technology*: "Members of the technological society actually know less and less about the fundamental structures and processes sustaining them .... The possibility of directing technological systems toward clearly perceived, consciously chosen, widely shared aims becomes an increasingly dubious matter." As specialized knowledge increases, so does ignorance about the relationship of parts to wholes. The consequence, Winner writes, is that "the whole society runs off track. The idea that civilized life consists of a fully conscious, intelligent, self-determining populace making informed choices about ends and means and taking action on that basis is revealed as a pathetic fantasy."[9] For some, the specter of nuclear winter is an illustration of just such a loss of control.

Other observers argue that the circumstantial barriers to democracy are also cultural. According to social analyst Daniel Bell, the political, economic, and cultural sectors of society speak different languages and coexist only awkwardly with one another. In this Babel of tongues, Bell can find no common ethic that might energize our society with some transcendent meaning. The social order, Bell concludes, "lacks either a culture that is a symbolic expression of any vitality or a moral impulse that is a motivational or binding force."[10]

Democracy Is Conceptually Flawed

A fourth argument poses the most serious questions of all. The basic problem, from this perspective, is not any practical problem in realizing democracy, but rather that democratic ideals are unrealizable in principle. Three political scientists, Wilson McWilliams, Dennis Hale, and Marc Landy, recently wrote that this country is based upon false "principles which are ... contrary to human nature or to the nature of politics."[11] Michael Walzer argues that the basic precepts of democracy are contradictory. For example, the ideals of citizenship do not make a coherent whole:

> *Patriotism, civility, toleration, and political activism pull him in different directions. The first and last require a kind of zeal — that is, they require both passion and conviction — and they make for excitement and tumult in public life. It is often said that the worst wars are civil wars because they are fought between brethren.... Civility and tolerance serve to reduce the tension, but they do so by undercutting the commitment. They encourage people to view their interests as fragmented, diverse, and private; they make for quiet and passive citizens, unwilling to intrude on others or to subject themselves to the discipline of a creed or party.*[12]

Joseph Schumpeter, the famous economist, wrote an epitaph for democracy in 1942.[13] He went so far as to say that the "refuting facts are known to all; everybody admits them with perfect, frequently with cynical, frankness. The theoretical basis, [of direct democracy] ... is dead; nobody accepts it as a correct theory of the body politic."[14] Democracy, at best, is reduced to an outdated relic of a long-past era.

Schumpeter understood democracy's conventional definition as: "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will."[15] But we cannot conceive of any circumstance, Schumpeter argued, in which the people could in fact arrive at a rational conception of the common good or the general will. Schumpeter's response to those whose concept of democracy requires a definition of the common good is, in a word, "nonsense." The problem as he saw it is in the concept itself. Democracy is based on fuzzy ideas imported from metaphysical schemes which vanish into thin air under critical scrutiny. How is it possible, Schumpeter wondered, that such a doctrine as democracy has lasted so long and continues to be the official language of government?

Are There Better Theories of Democracy?

What can be said to such powerful arguments? It is interesting that answers to criticisms of democracy have come from many of the same people who pronounced democracy — or some particular form of it — dead. Everyone who criticizes one or another interpretation of democracy is not necessarily ready to give up on the idea. Many critics have in mind a concept of democracy that, in their view, would rescue it from unreality and make it effective. There are innumerable schools of democratic "revisionists," but it is helpful to group them into just two categories. In one category are those who think of the political system as if it were a kind of marketplace of ideas and values, in which politics is a form of adjudication. In the other category are those who believe that democracy has to return to basic values or a stronger sense of community and not just depend on interest group transactions.

Joseph Schumpeter, for example, was not led by the force of his criticism of democracy to abandon it. He proposed instead to redefine it. The classical theory of democracy, he said, vests primary power in the electorate and secondary power in the elected representatives. If we reversed that emphasis, he argued, we would be able to salvage some meaning for democracy.

In Schumpeter's view, democracy is best understood as an "institutional arrangement ... in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."[16] This kind of democracy is like intense economic competition made political. In this form, it is highly indirect or representative. There need be few if any common ideals and values, only the beneficent force of political competition, the struggle for advantage. The claim of such a perspective is that the natural competition of society produces the greatest progress. This is, of course, a laissez-faire perspective, the most famous representative of which was the political economist Adam Smith. He maintained that an "invisible hand" produced a superior society out of the endeavors of unfettered individual enterprise. Smith and his economic theory had a profound effect on democratic theory. His ideas about the efficacy of individually self-interested competition were applied to political as well as economic behavior:

> *As every individual ... endeavours as much as he can ... to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it.... He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an*

invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.... By pursuing his own interests he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.[17]

In sum, as Robert Reich, professor at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government writes, "The public good, or 'public interest,' is thus best understood as the sum of ... individual preferences. Society is improved whenever some people's preferences can be satisfied without making other people worse off. Most of the time, private market exchanges suffice for improving society...."[18] In a word, this concept of democracy equates it with political competition. Decisions about who wins and loses are to be made by majority voting. Democracy is free competition, like that which we value in a market economy.

Much of today's prevailing wisdom about democracy is based on this market model — but with one important addition, the introduction of interest groups. Many, perhaps most, political analysts today believe that people must join together in interest groups to have power and that these interest groups are the major players in the political market. We align ourselves with our favorite cause, region, institution, economic interest, or profession and then compete for our objectives through the media, through lobbying, and ultimately, through the ballot box. The public interest is determined and policy decisions are made by aggregating, through majority vote, the opinions from all of our organized interest groups.

There is one variation on this theme that is worth noting. Some argue that citizens' diverse and insatiable preferences make it impossible to arrive at stable policy decisions by majority voting. They would restructure democracy by putting more emphasis on interactive bargaining and negotiating. Voting would be a matter of making interest group trade-offs rather than an expression of individual preferences.[19] In bargaining, the organized interest groups would be the parties at the table. Government, as defined by such politics, would mediate between interest groups rather than representing people.

This description of interest group democracy has much in its favor. Powerful interest groups obviously exist and they obviously have significant influence on decision making. But critics argue that interest group democracy is based on two questionable premises: first, that everyone in an interest group has the same opinion, and second, that everyone is in an organized group. Critics also question interest group democracy on the grounds that it does not provide citizens with all the valid options. The only options that find their way onto the ballots, this critique maintains, the only choices the public gets to hear about, are those that powerful interests have decided are appropriate.[20]

Nonetheless, the prevailing view remains that government is to be that force in the political marketplace which regulates the powerful force of self-interested factions. While some of the Founders were influenced by Christian theology and the classical democratic notions of virtue, the freedom to pursue individual ends, not the cultivation of public virtue, is said to be central to American government. And while theorists like James Madison referred to the "common good" and the "good of the whole," most scholars insist that our system is based on the adjudication of interests, not the formation of character.[21]

Democracy Is Shared Values

The second group of revisionists challenges this marketlike concept of a democracy dominated by interest groups. They believe that what modern democracy needs most is a return to a sense of shared values. Without the cohesion provided by an affirmation of traditional democratic values, competing for self-interest will ultimately be destructive. Without values, they fear, democracy would become a matter of mechanics, a tangle of procedures.

Their argument is that Adam Smith was wrong. There is no guiding hand that will produce a common good out of aggregated selfishness. This would make self-interest the cornerstone of our political system, and no coherent sense of the common good or a convincing public philosophy could emerge. In the words of

Benjamin Barber, in *Strong Democracy*, "From this precarious foundation [of self-interest], no firm theory of citizenship, participation, public goods, or civic virtue can be expected to arise.... [Such] democracy, therefore, can never lead too far from Ambrose Bierce's cynical definition of politics as 'the conduct of public affairs for private advantage.' "[22]

George Will mounts a similar critique in his book, *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does*. Will charges that the prevailing theory of democracy makes self-interest the premise of our political system. Hobbes, together with Machiavelli before and Locke after him, reduced politics from a concern with civic virtue to a concern with power and order. Narrow utilitarian values of the marketplace (such as tolerance) came to prevail over a noble idea of excellence.[23]

Politics is demoted from its classical task of educating reason and inducing civic virtue to one of regulating passions with countervailing passions. "Modern political philosophy has transformed a fact (man's appetitive nature) into a moral principle: Man should be allowed, even encouraged, to do what he most desires to do (consistent, of course, with other people doing likewise)...." A society so constructed, Will argues, cannot long endure: "Our sense of citizenship, of social warmth and shared fate, has become thin gruel."[24]

The question that this second group of democratic revisionists faces is: How are the shared values they claim to be essential for society to be established?

Democracy Is Deliberation

A good part of the dilemma is in the word "values." To many, "values" mean the things they know with absolute certainty. Or as someone said in discussing this definition, "values are the parts of the *Bible* written in red ink." But history is full of examples of destructive conflicts over values understood that way. America is said to have succeeded in creating a new nation because it did not allow these kinds of value conflicts, often expressed in religious terms, to emigrate to its shores. America's political genius is said to be the genius of the practical. Our tradition is

described as one of arguing about means, not ends, so that we could avoid ideological wars.

Yet can any nation, particularly one that puts such a premium on competition, sustain itself and prosper as a good nation if there is not some elemental cohesion in the society? We may not need or even be able to survive with a rigid ideology of values. But if there is to be more than self-defining interests, don't we have to find something shareable in what we consider valuable? The case for deliberative democracy is that it is the means for defining — perhaps even creating — the shareable. In this context "values" are not understood as things people are absolutely certain about. "Values," in this context, means more broadly, what is valuable or of fundamental importance to human beings — the reflections of their deepest motivations and their most characteristic mind-sets or ways of seeing the world.

In this sense, what we hold to be of value is drawn from our sense of the consequences of an action on the totality of our well-being. All of our interests are not individual or special interests. We are sensitive to the consequences of any political action on the whole of the political community. And that sensitivity leads to larger interests, which might be called "macromotives."[25] The proposition here is not that people are altruistic but rather that their interests are more broadly defined.

From this point of view, deliberation is central to democracy because it is the means through which, in Edmund Burke's language, broader concerns are discovered.[26] Our deliberations are to find the commonality in our most fundamental political motivations. And that is possible because basic motives tend to have some claim on all of us. They grow out of human nature. But the commonality is not self-evident. That has to be discovered. Or, as some would insist, that commonness has to be created. In either case, deliberation is essential.

The impulse for cohesion in society — for binding ourselves together — when joined with our macromotives, our sense of how our individual interests are tied to the interests we have in the larger political community, creates a source of power for shared purposes. The combination produces the essential spark for political action — the political will to act:

In a democracy this mixture of values and solidarity is the richest source of political power. Commitment to ideas and purposes creates "will," and widespread agreement produces legitimacy. The combination is legitimate will.[27]

The question of political will, of who cares, of whether anything at all will be done, is a first-order political question. It precedes the question that market democracy addresses: "Who will win?" It is a question we see most clearly in the local politics of community-building and in the international politics of dispute resolution. In those situations, some sense of shared interest must emerge from diverse, often conflicting interests; the political will must be found to act in the face of chronic neglect or frustrating deadlocks.

An excellent description of the political force behind those interests which reflect a vision of the general good of society is in the book that Robert Reich edited on *The Power of Public Ideas*. "Public ideas" is Reich's name for social mind-sets that reflect our broader sense of well-being, our macromotives. Such ideas, he and his colleagues believe, have enormous power. They "determine how public problems are defined and understood, ... governments depend on such ideas for motivating public action." It is not just the inside game of government (bureaucratic politics) or economic imperatives that influence our political destiny. It is definitions of the public good.[28] And these definitions grow out of our deliberations.

The challenges to this model of deliberative democracy are the tendency for passions to override the reasonableness needed for public talk and the disadvantages that exclude certain people from meaningful participation. The frightening prospect to some is that deliberation will be used to pacify the outraged, obscure real differences, and otherwise "manage" political conflict on the assumption that policies can be formulated to serve all interests and harm none.

Your Theory of Democracy

After uplifting stories about John Maverick and Thomas Jefferson, why this lengthy analysis of democracy? The purpose is not to answer each argument, to say that the critics are wrong and to put an end to all doubts. The questions raised in this chapter are central to the ongoing debate about what democracy is, has been, and most important, can be. There are a great many variations to the democratic tradition. It is not monolithic. And in any Forum you will find people who reflect these many, varied understandings of the nature of our political system. Some will see that system as necessarily representative. Others will believe passionately that it should be more direct. Some will be quite content with interest group politics or think of the ballot box as the quintessence of democracy. Others will be restive about what they sense as loss of common values and purposes. Still others will be alarmed by the question of whose values and purposes are going to become "The Values" for our country.

The definition of democracy we use is important. Surely there are some ways of understanding democracy that are better than others; we have learned something since Pericles. But we are still learning. The Forums can be instrumental in that learning. They are places for the "issues behind the issues" to be aired. They can be used by people to work their way through concepts of democracy just as they work their way through policy options.

1 Ralph Ketcham, *Individualism and Public Life, p. 146-147.*

2 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, p. 59.

3 Michael Walzer, *Radical Principles*, pp. 54-55.

4 Steve Wooley, "The Problem Behind the Problem: Defense Policy & Nuclear Arms."

5 Pericles, "Funeral Oration," p. 39.

6 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, p. 14.

7 St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, p. 228.

8 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 106-107.

9 Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology*, pp. 295-296.

10 Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 84.

11 Dennis Hale, Marc Landy, and Wilson C. McWilliams, "Freedom, Civic Virtue, and the Failure of Our Constitution," p. 13.

12 Walzer, *Radical Principles*, p. 67.

13 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy.*

14 *Ibid.*, p. 265.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 269.

17 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 423.

18 Robert B. Reich, ed., *The Power of Public Ideas*, p. 2.

19 See, for example, James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent.*

20 For more information on this school of legitimation theory, see William Connolly, *Legitimacy and the State*, and Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis.*

21 There is an excellent discussion of this point of view in Dan Himmelfarb's article, "Freedom, Virtue, and the Founding Fathers."

22 Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 4.

23 George F. Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, pp. 30-31.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 45.

25 Orren, "Beyond Self Interest," p. 14

[26] Reich, "Policy Making in a Democracy," p. 123.

[27] Orren, "Beyond Self-Interest," p. 27.

[28] Robert B. Reich, "Policy Making in a Democracy," p. 123 and Orren, "Beyond Self-Interest," p. 14.

Chapter Three

PARTICIPATION IN A DEMOCRACY — THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE PUBLIC

The first questions generated by the Forums are often: "Why should I participate? What's in it for me? Does the average citizen or the public really count anymore? If not, why bother?" There are all kinds of ready responses to these questions. They range from moral exhortation, "Participation is your duty," to indifference, "Don't worry about it." Some believe that the public's apathy is inevitable and eternal. Some even consider it useful. Recall those who argue that if everyone were interested in everything, politics would become too intense. Ballot box democracy, just getting people to vote, is enough democracy.

So why should people take valuable time to participate in the Forums?

Participate in What?

Questions about participation have, at their core, questions about how our political system does or should work. Participation should have a political effect. But what is politics — just those things politicians do?

By politics most people have in mind those immediate and visible activities having to do with electing officials and passing legislation. The standard definition of political participation is an act of "*influencing* the government, either by affecting the *choice* of government personnel or by affecting the *choices made by* government personnel."[1] That is certainly politics but it is far from *all* of politics.

The whole of politics includes all of our organized efforts to solve common problems. Politics is literally those activities that are necessary for the functioning of the *polis*, the community. Politics includes a wide range of formal and informal

efforts to solve common problems and advance the common good. A neighborhood association trying to revitalize its community is a political activity. A citizen coalition for a better environment is political. A school board deciding on a budget is political. And anyone interested in these efforts — in the education their children receive or the quality of the water they drink or the character of the community where they live — has political interests. Politics is not just for politicians. As Aristotle observed, we are all political creatures.

Before we can get down to the specifics of a ballot or a piece of legislation, we have some more basic political work to do, some prior questions to answer. What do we value — what is really important to us? What kind of country do we want? What standards will we use in defining "the good life"? What will we expect of ourselves as a people? What mandate are we willing to give government? Such decisions fall within the undelegable responsibilities of the public. *Politics, most basically, is about making choices on these questions; the public's role is to set standards, to decide on directions.*

"Policy" is synonymous with "direction" in the NIF vocabulary. Making public policy is not limited to selecting technical options within a piece of legislation. Forum discussions are often filled with reference to laws and legislation, but the purpose of the discussions is to explore the basic directions we want our country to take. The focus is on what "We the People" — the public — believe we *should* do. The emphasis is on the *public's* decision-making responsibilities.

Abraham Lincoln thought that this setting of directions, what he called the shaping of "public sentiment," was the most important part of politics.

> *In this and like communities ... public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.*[2]

A century later, former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, using different words, came to the same conclusion:

At the end of the day, the American people are going to have to decide. No president can pursue a policy for very long without the support and the understanding of the Congress and the American people. That's been demonstrated over and over again.[3]

The Forums are places where the public begins its politics. They are places where public sentiment is shaped, where political directions are charted. One might say that the politics of the public is preliminary to and a prerequisite for the politics of government.

The Public Defined

Unfortunately "the public" isn't clearly defined for most people. Much of the original meaning of the term has been lost. How we think of the public, and what it takes to make one, is crucial. Public forums can't be understood apart from the way we understand the public itself. Parker Palmer wrote that "the public is around us all the time." We experience it every day. Our interrelations — and their consequences — exist. And they exist whether we acknowledge them or not. But usually, we do not. John Dewey said that "the outstanding problem of the Public is discovery and identification of itself...."[4] A public that is invisible robs us of a sense of what it requires of us — and what it offers us. In Palmer's words:

There will always be a public, as long as there are people in societies. The public is all around us all the time, and each of us is always a part of it. But

we lack awareness of that fact, appreciation of that opportunity, understanding of the need for conscious public participation. So public life, which could be a force for unity, and a stimulating dimension of individual experience, lies fallow....[5]

For some, public means the ordinary, something open to everyone — the lowest common denominator, as in "public" restrooms and "public" transportation. The public is everyone, the mass, the many. For others, the public means the government, as in a "public official." In this sense, "public" and "government" are interchangeable. These two meanings of "public" miss its real meaning. "The public" and "the government" are not the same. Mayors, governors, and members of Congress are called public officials, when they are, in actuality, *government* officials. Neither is the public a mass of people.

The deeper concept of "the public" is made evident by the word's origin. The term combines the Latin words for people (*populus*) and for maturity (*pubes*). A public, then, is not a crowd, but a group of people with a certain relation to one another — more precisely, a "mature" relation. "Government" has quite a different meaning. To govern originally meant to steer a ship — it meant to control. A government, then, is not the people, it is an instrument of the people for acting collectively. Public policies are the directions the public gives to government; they are like navigational instructions.

Yet we can be a public when we are not instructing governments. We are a public when we are engaged by any political concern, when we are part of a political community. *Our public life is our shared life in all of its forms.* Not only neighborhood associations and school boards, but fund drives for worthwhile charities and the voluntary associations promoting our favorite causes are public activities. Normally, we don't think of these voluntary efforts as political, but in the broadest sense they are. They do create and define the *polis*, the political community. As the John Maverick story illustrated, the public realm is older, more

inclusive, and more basic than the realm of government. The public is pre-governmental, in that setting directions has to precede steering or controlling.

What makes the "public" different from the mass, the populus, is the nature of the relationships people have to one another. What is it about that relation that makes it mature? In mass society, most of the people we deal with are strangers. We deal with them because there are many things that we want to accomplish which we cannot do by ourselves. So we often have to turn to these "other people," strangers, not family or kin, who share our space — our neighborhood, our community, our country. But in the process, strangers with whom we need to reach common objectives become important to us. We each take responsibility for the relationship. It is not a matter of sentiment but of objective political reality. And when this happens, we are no longer a mass of strangers but a public.

People become a public when they acknowledge their interconnectedness and the consequences of their tie with others — over extended time. That is what is implied in characterizing a public as a connected group of people with "mature" relations. *To be fully public is to be cognizant of the reality of our interdependence. It is to be as aware as we can of the consequences of our actions on the whole of the political community.* Perhaps this more complete understanding of the public forces us to deal simultaneously with both the past and the future. A sense of the past heightens a people's awareness of interdependence; the shadow of the future heightens its appreciation for consequences.

> We misunderstand public life if we equate it with politics, with the activities of government. Not only do we misunderstand it, we also strangle our sense of public possibilities. The heart of public life is simply the interaction of strangers, and that is a basic and vital human experience, not a specialized political process.
>
> — Parker J. Palmer[6]

The Public as More than the Majority

Once we distinguish the public from the government, on the one hand, and from a crowd, on the other, we can focus more closely on different understandings of the term. The concept of "the public" in most people's minds, even when distinguished from "the government," is still strongly influenced by the most commonly acknowledged role of the public, which is electing officials for government. The type of interaction used to create a public determines the type of public that results. The public created by electoral politics is a *majoritarian public*. People listen to candidates, debate among themselves, and vote to determine what candidate or issue has a majority.

There are other kinds of publics, which grow out of other forms of interaction. One view holds that voting to determine a public by majority is not our best resort in a democracy — it is our last resort. We use it when other means for coming together are not adequate to the circumstances. Another way we have of forming a public, one that is central to the town meeting tradition and the Forums, leads to what might be called the *integrated public*. You may not recognize this term but you can see this public at work every day in community-building and local problem solving. This is the public formed from the intense interaction of common deliberations. We transform our individual preferences into a new definition of the public interest. The result is a synthesis not an aggregation.

The *integrated public* is quite different from the *majoritarian public*. (A good example of the majoritarian public is the public of opinion polls.) In the majoritarian public, individual opinions do not interact. Instead, they are aggregated, added together, and the majority of those with the same opinion are said to be "the public." You could say that the participants at the start of a Forum usually resemble a majoritarian public, but the group at the end may more closely resemble an integrated public.

We Are So Different, Can There Be a Public Interest?

If there is more to public life than trying to influence the government, if public life is our common or shared life, people in Forums have to face the practical versions of a theoretical question discussed in the preceding chapter — don't we have to agree on some things in order to share them? The Forums are described as "searching for a common ground." Does that mean that the Forums are meant to result in agreements on what the "real" public interest is?

When asked, "Are you trying to get everyone to agree?" most Forum moderators will say "No." But what, then, is the term that describes the sharing of diverse interests capable of producing the common direction that we need as a framework for policy? How is that sharing different from total agreement? How is it achieved in a way that still gives due recognition to differing personal views?

Here is another way to ask these questions: Is unity possible in as diverse a country as ours? Is there common ground short of uniformity of belief?

It is simple enough to say that it may be neither possible nor desirable to have unanimous agreement — consensus — on issues. But finding a way to acknowledge both the inevitability of differences and the necessity of some shared interests poses one of the most difficult problems for a Forum leader. And not just for a Forum leader. It is also one of the most difficult problems in democratic theory. Democracies naturally produce disagreement. Yet action depends on some kind of accord. What binds us together in the face of disagreements?

One answer came from a Forum moderator who said that what his group shared, when they shared nothing else, was the value they placed on the conversation itself. Others have made much the same point:

Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, and opinions — an encounter in which they reconsider and mutually revise opinions and interests, both individual and common. It happens always in a

context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. What matters is not unanimity but discourse.[7]

Philosophers, struggling with the dilemma of diversity versus agreement, have substituted words like "concord" or "accord" for agreement. These words emphasize the need for harmony or compatibility among the *ways* that people go about discussing their differences and applying their values to the issues of the day. In one Forum, two participants were about to discuss the issue of welfare. The first said, "Welfare is robbery; it is immoral." The person sitting across from him responded, "If you approach the issue that way, there is nothing the rest of us can say; you've ended the discussion before it has begun." Even if the two did not have totally different views on the subject itself, the way the first participant approached the subject was so out of harmony with the way others wanted to deal with the issue that the group couldn't proceed. The Spanish philosopher Ortega wrote that "when concord is lacking, when there is no agreement about how to arbitrate clashing differences, men cease to be able to tolerate the very existence of those differences."[8]

In trying to find their own definition of common ground, Forum leaders have described it as the world of "we can" rather than the world of "I want." That is, the search for common ground may be best understood as the search for what we as a people think is best for the community as a whole, not what we might prefer individually.

One of the problems with this definition, however, is that it tends to equate common ground with compromise. There is an important difference between the two. When we talk of compromise, we talk of a resolution of differences in which we both give up something; compromise is the halfway point between conflicting individual opinions. What Forum leaders point to as being more desirable are

outcomes which both preserve individual opinions and integrate them into a shared perspective. They have in mind a more creative act for the Forums than just reaching compromises.

Imagine that you and your friends are standing around a building, trying to determine what condition it is in so that you can make a decision to repair it or tear it down. You could send everyone out to stand on different sides to inspect the building and then invite them back in to give you their opinion. Each person would report on the side he or she faced. Some would see an entrance in good repair, others the deteriorating wall on the back. You could decide which perspective to accept by voting — but that aggregation of opinion would only reveal which side had the largest number of viewers. On the other hand, you could have the group exchange views, reflect on what they saw and then integrate those different perspectives into a composite. They would then be able to envision the building as a whole. The result from the integration of views would be quite different — and probably reflect more accurately what the building was like.

In the first instance, agreement would be achieved by aggregating the opinions to find the dominant one. It is also imaginable that a single individual could have persuaded the group to accept his or her view. Then the public's interest would be homogenized — all alike. But if the group used its individual perspectives to create a composite picture, they would have reached a very different kind of public agreement. In that case, they would have done something much more creative. They would have blended many angles of vision into something new — a picture of the whole structure that was different from any single existing perspective. But in this case, the diversity of individual views would not be discounted because the view of the whole was dependent upon different, not the same, perspectives.

Different points of view, even a sense of what is *not* shareable, is useful in delineating what is common ground. If we were surveying a piece of property, it would be very important to know where our land ended and someone else's began. In the same way, knowing what is not common is essential to defining what is common. To believe that people share in a common core of basic motivations or

values is not to believe that everyone is the same in the way they order and apply their sense of what is most valuable.

When we talk about public consent we must remember that it comes in very different forms. We can have consent by reducing all views to one homogeneous view. We can reach it by finding the majority view. Or we can reach consent by drawing from our individual views a new, public perspective. In a similar fashion the public interest can be thought of as a monolith, as an aggregate of interests, or as the integration of interests.

The Forums aim at an integration of views and interests in the search for common ground.

Public vs. Private?

Our reaction to an emphasis on the importance of a shared or public life is sometimes to feel the urge to defend the importance of individuals and private life. We are unique individuals and, in America, proudly individualistic. We lead private lives and value our privacy. Talk of community, of shared purposes, of the integration of our views, sometimes suggests a threat to our individuality, perhaps even to our independence. The prospects of group thinking and committee mentality are worth worrying about. Those concerns give rise to questions like: "I already know what I think, why should I go to a Forum?" These questions grow out of a sense that what is public is the antithesis of what is private.

> The motivating force of the theory of a Democratic way of life is still a belief that as individuals we live cooperatively, and, to the best of our ability, serve the community in which we live, and that our own success, to be real, must contribute to the success of others.
>
> — Eleanor Roosevelt[9]

It is instructive, however, to note that so many of the words in our language for individual freedom have their roots in words for belonging. Originally to be free meant to be a part of a nation, a citizen, not a slave.[10] There is another way then to look at the relation of the public and the private. What is personal and what is public may actually be complementary — even interdependent. In the case of Forums, the rich variety of individual experience, values, and opinions are indispensable to truly public discussion. Indeed, our individuality and diversity may be in jeopardy precisely when we try to be totally private.

Consider Parker Palmer's view of the relation between our public and our private lives.

> *Indeed, the very health of the private realm depends on the health of the public sphere. The public is the human environment in which the private exists; if the environment is polluted, then private life will suffer. When people do not care about the common life ... there is no way private life can offer security for the individual against anything from crime to the erosion of interpersonal commitments. The excessive privatism of our time is only a misguided effort to preserve values which are threatened by the collapse of our public life.*[11]

From this perspective, there are no such things as impersonal policy issues. It is tempting to say that there are only *personal* issues, just to make a point. Yet if the public and personal are corollaries, then it is not contradictory to say that all public issues begin as personal issues. People become engaged in policy issues only when they can connect them to their private interests. One professor, Robert McKenzie, has a simple exercise for helping students make that connection in his public policy class. First he asks his students to list their personal goals on a card. Then he asks them to take another card and list the characteristics of the world they want to live

in. The first card usually has goals that point inward, for example, a desire for greater self-understanding. The second usually ranks social justice and peace as principal objectives. Professor McKenzie then asks the obvious question: How does the class propose to get from the goals on the first card to the objectives listed on the second? By this exercise, he has set the stage for getting at the personal connections to national policy issues.[12]

Public Participation and Private Identity

> ...if I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?
>
> —Hillel[13]

Connecting the personal and the public may not only be essential for public reasons — it may be essential for personal ones as well. George Kateb is convinced that public participation is needed to establish private identity.

> *In the public realm a person's identity is established by the play of different opinions about him; just as his own "truth" is enhanced in contention with the truths of others. He is real to himself only because he is publicly real to others.*[14]

It is a big claim to say that people are only real to themselves when they are real to others. But it is not claiming too much to say that personal identity is shaped through social interactions. It is a very Jeffersonian way of understanding individuality as a function of public experience.[15] And it is a notion validated by what we see happening every day. For example, young people can be seen taking on a personal identity that is characteristic of the peer group they admire most. Youths and adults alike are defined by for whom and for what they are willing to

take responsibility. Those who have participated in the Forums for several years are convinced by the interaction they have seen between people that there are opportunities for personal growth and development in their deliberations.

The case for personal development as an outcome of public engagement is based on the thesis that we can grow (be "enhanced") through the way we deal with diversity and difference. As we move from the protected world of family and friends to mass society, we are confronted with all kinds of institutions of work and social organizations, with all kinds of demands from those institutions, and with all kinds of people.

Under these pressures, the road divides and people seem to respond in one of two ways. On the one hand, they can respond to the challenges of mass society by becoming defensive and building an enclave around themselves. At best they become tolerant of differences and willing to make compromises — to live and let live. At worst, they become defensive and hostile to anything that they don't like. On the other hand, they can take on the challenge of diversity openly and learn how to grow stronger and richer from it. Testing the validity of what we believe with others of different beliefs requires a very strong public psyche. "I never met anyone I couldn't learn something from," is a good example of an open response. The person making the comment wasn't talking about his friends — not even about people he liked. He was describing how he reacted to difference.

> What matters is not the utterance of opinions. What matters is the confrontation of opinions in debate.... We have the substance of liberty ... when the wise man can increase his wisdom by hearing the judgment of his peers.
>
> — Walter Lippmann[16]

If we have the psychological strength for open interactions, several things happen. First, our world enlarges. It may be that our worlds are made smaller or larger, by the degree of diversity we can accept. We absorb and become richer by adding to ourselves from others. Our sense of connection and interrelation and

60 61

belonging grows. Our sense of the ways in which our well-being is linked to others (who may seem remote but really are not) becomes increasingly acute. Benjamin Barber has a compelling way of explaining the relation of public attachment to personal identity. He observes that when people marry they do not cease to have a personal identity, but rather that identity takes on new meaning because of the marriage, and if children follow, they add to an evolving sense of self in their parents.

Part of our growth as public beings comes from new ways of perceiving others. Our first instinct is to see people as *we* are. You and I are alike, therefore I can identify with you. There is a step beyond that: we can learn to see people as they see themselves, from their perspectives, not just from our own. That requires not only an intellectual capacity, but also a psychological capacity to overcome the instinctive fear of difference.

The willingness to open ourselves and our values to strangers is risky. It takes courage. Even people who have been in partisan politics for some time report that the Forums put them on the spot. They have to say what they believe personally rather than defending a predetermined position.

But there are benefits to putting ourselves on the spot. We develop a capacity to work out the conflicts *within* our own values. We borrow many of our values from others, even though we think of them as our own. If our perceptions and values are not tested against the experience of others, we never deal with the discrepancies in our experiences or their internal contradictions.[17]

The concept of personal benefit and growth through public participation is consistent with the earliest concepts of politics. Being publicly active was not just for the protection of self-interest, according to the Athenians, who believed that engagement in public affairs kept people from becoming "idiots," or purely private beings. It transformed people from private individuals into public citizens. Recalling that tradition, political philosophers Hanna Pitkin and Sara Shumer write:

For the real revolutionizing power of democracy lies not in deploying a massive army of

unanimous, disciplined followers for this or that radical policy preference, but in transforming people from consumers, victims, and exploiters into responsible citizens, extending their horizons and deepening their understanding, engaging their capacities, their suppressed anger and need in the cause of justice.[18]

Two scholars of public administration, Stevens Redburn and Yong Cho, make a similar point. They contrast the modern, legalistic view of participation with the classical notion that political activity was personally liberating:

Implicit in modern theories of democratic government is the idea that participation has practical instrumental value for the participant. That is, politics is viewed as a means to an end; seldom, if ever, as an end in itself. An older view of democracy, such as Aristotle's, sees the practice of citizenship as intrinsically rewarding.... With one view goes the perception that political action is a necessary but burdensome or consuming activity and with the other the view that participation is inherently pleasurable and liberating.[19]

The personal benefits of participation speak to one of our contemporary problems — the feeling of being disconnected, alone. Here is the way Daniel Yankelovich, president of the Public Agenda Foundation, describes the problem:

A hunger for deeper personal relationships — shows up in our research findings as a growing conviction that a me-first, satisfy-all-my-desires attitude leads to relationships that are superficial,

transitory and ultimately unsatisfying. This conclusion then leads people to seek deeper, more sustained relationships — to other people, and also to things, ideas and places.... Surveys show that 70 percent of Americans now recognize that while they have many acquaintances they have few close friends — and they experience this as a serious void in their lives.... Feeling this void causes people to grow less preoccupied with themselves and to look for closer ties with others. In 1973 ... roughly one-third of Americans felt an intense need to compensate for the impersonal and threatening aspects of modern life by seeking mutual identification with others based on close ethnic ties or ties of shared interests, needs, backgrounds, age or values. By the beginning of the nineteen-eighties the [percentage]... increased to 47 percent — to almost half of the population — a large and significant jump in a few short years.[20]

The point is that the Forums can be understood as speaking to the feeling of being disconnected, the feeling that we are entangled but not engaged with one another. One Forum participant, a woman in her late eighties, who had been in the habit of sitting in front of the television hour after hour was enticed into attending some Forums. When she was asked afterwards about the effect the discussions had, she did not talk about the policies at all. She talked about being reconnected with her family. Fearful that she didn't know enough, she had not felt comfortable expressing her opinions at home. For her, she said, the Forums took courage, but they also gave her courage.

Admittedly, this is an idiosyncratic example. Still, it is an illuminating one. Public participation creates a public self, a self capable of experiencing new forms of public happiness.

> In the civil state man foregoes, to be sure, numerous benefits that he has been enjoying as grants from nature. So great, however, are the benefits that he acquires in their stead — such is the extent to which his faculties are mobilized and developed, such the degree to which his concepts are broadened and his sentiments ennobled, such the level to which his soul is lifted up...
>
> — Jean Jacques Rousseau[21]

Participation: Acting Like We Belong

This chapter began with the often-heard question: Why should I participate and devote my personal time to public matters? We've looked in a deeper and broader way at what the public is, what it does, and how it is created by our participation. We've gone beyond the conventional way of seeing what is public separate from what is private. We've considered the arguments that there are personal benefits to be derived from public participation.

Just as we've looked at the deeper meanings of public, now we need to look at the deeper meanings of participation.

We all know that politics involves conflict and contest, and one of the dominant images of political participation is contesting for gain. But this was not the original understanding of participation. There is no reason to think that our ancestors were less self-interested or competitive than people are today. They may have been *more* inclined to compete. Yet the original idea of public participation did not connote contesting for gain.

The word for participation was first used to describe the relation of parts to the whole. The parts *belong* to the whole. This meaning is best captured now when we

talk about participating in a family reunion. When we participate in a reunion, *we act as if we belong*. In the same sense, public participating is simply acting as if we belong. We belong to the public affairs of our time; we belong in our community and our country.

According to political scientist Lawrence Scaff, other concepts of participation came from Greek words that meant "to hold or have in common" and "to associate, communicate, or share."

> *These meanings have persisted in the ordinary political language of Western societies: participation has stood for the idea of sharing or taking part with others in some kind of common activity....*
>
> *The very nature of politics reveals itself through the concept of participation as "sharing." Rather than depicting politics as having to do essentially with rule, power, or a competitive struggle for advantage, this language of participation suggests that it should be understood as the set of activities and relationships concerned with maintaining a ... community characterized by a sharing of equality, law, and justice among citizens.*[22]

In the classical view, which remains alive today, participation is an affirmation of belonging. This way of thinking seems to contrast sharply with another concept of participation — participation as a legal right, a means of empowerment. But the two concepts are not incompatible. Participation is certainly a legal right in a democracy, but it is barren without a definition of how we are to act when we participate. Going about asserting our rights to one another would make for a rather contentious political community.

Establishing participation as a legal right has the important effect of keeping the political system open. It does empower. And we are well advised to remind

ourselves from time to time that *in a democracy the majority doesn't rule — it is only the majority of those who participate that rule.*

The Forums can generate a sense of empowerment, a sense of being part of the sovereignty of one's country. As one participant said, "I've been around for a good many years, and nobody has ever asked me to take part in any opinion poll." The obligation of the Forums is to enable otherwise unheard people to be heard, and learn what it means to "act as if we belong."

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

As you can see, there are many concepts of what it means to participate and there are many reasons for participating. But there is one other ideal that informs our understanding of public participation. It has to do with how we feel and think about the strangers with whom we live. Its origins are more from our religious than our political traditions. It is best expressed in the biblical admonition: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God." (*Leviticus 19:33-34*).

People may not be able to regard strangers exactly as they regard themselves and their kin. But the point is that we are all strangers to someone and the standards that we set for those relations can be applied to ourselves just as we apply them to others.

1 Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America*, p. 2.

2 Abraham Lincoln. As quoted in Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 107.

3 Philip Geyelin, "Dean Rusk's Pursuit of Peace," *The Washington Post*, 8 February 1984, A19. © 1984, Washington Post Writers Group.

4 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 185.

5 Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 34.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

7 Hanna F. Pitkin and Sara M. Shumer, "On Participation," pp. 47-48.

8 Robert McClintock, *Man and His Circumstances*, p. 262.

9 Norman Cousins, ed., *A Treasury of Democracy*, p. 245.

10 *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 1075.

11 Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 31.

12 Robert H. McKenzie, "Teaching Public Leadership."

13 David De Sola Pool, ed., *The Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals*, p. 666.

14 George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, pp. 14-15.

15 Ketcham, *Individualiam and Public Life*, p. 162.

16 Cousins, *A Treasury of Democracy*, p. 231.

17 Carl R. Rogers and Barry Stevens, *Person to Person*, p. 11.

18 Pitkin and Shumer, "On Participation," p. 48.

19 F. Stevens Redburn and Yong H. Cho, "Citizenship, Community Life, and Public Policy," p. 33.

20 Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules*, p. 251.

21 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 26. Rousseau of course was critical of the civil state and praised its benefit only when it did not reduce humanity to "a state even lower than the state of nature."

22 Lawrence A. Scaff, *Participation in the Western Political Tradition*, pp. 9, 34.

Chapter Four

THE BUSINESS OF FORUMS: PUBLIC TALK, CHOICE, KNOWLEDGE, AND JUDGMENT

If it is the public's responsibility to set directions and if participation is sharing in that responsibility, how does the National Issues Forums model propose to put those ideals into practice? To put the question more directly: What is supposed to happen in a Forum that will enable the public to carry on the public's business? For the Forums, the answer to those questions is based on the way public talk, choice, knowledge, and judgment are understood. These concepts give rise to a very different model for public talk.

The shortest, simplest answer to the question of what people do in a Forum is that they talk to one another. But they talk publicly. *The first thing we share as a public is public talk.* Public talk is not just another conversation, but political dialogue and, as such, it implies both listening and talking. As the story of John Maverick revealed, democracies begin in talk. Indeed, the quality of a democracy is directly related to the quality of its public talk. But what is so special about that talk? How can Forum talk be a way of learning about public policy? How is it that talk can lead to the mastery of today's complex issues?

The Forums' response begins with the proposition that the public learns its business in a more complex fashion than just amassing facts. The public already gets the news (and an enormous amount of it) from newspapers, radios, and TV stations. Yet there is evidence that the public still isn't well informed. Some would go so far as to say that the public can never be well informed. "All the public has is opinion, and that is always changing." But Forum talk, public talk, is not another bull session about "the facts." Forum talk is about something else.

If the central work of the public is in setting directions, then public talk is necessarily about the choices to be made in deciding those directions. Making choices is hard work; it requires *talking through,* not just *talking about,* public issues. The work involved in making choices ("choice work") also requires more than technical facts. It requires knowing what "the facts" mean to different people with different values in different circumstances. *That kind of knowledge can be called public knowledge; it consists of those things we know only when we are together.* We engage in shared talk in order to have shared, public knowledge.

Concepts such as public talk, choice work, and public knowledge make for a unique kind of public Forum. So does a fourth concept central to these Forums — public judgment. These Forums *make a distinction between mass personal opinion and public judgment.* The purpose in making the distinction is to call attention to the difference between initial impressions and individual points of view, and more reflective and shared perspectives. It is the difference between what *I think,* the first time, and what *we think,* on second thought. Forum talk should help groups move from opinion to judgment.

This chapter is about how these four concepts delineate the kind of work that a Forum must do for the public to be effective in learning the public's business.

Speech as an Act of Participation

We have all heard it said that "talk is cheap." But if it sometimes is, is it always? Is talk just words, the opposite of action? Or is speech an indispensable preliminary to action, perhaps even a kind of action?

We all talk, so it is easy to take talk for granted, to overlook its importance. The Founders offered an unparalleled example of dialogue, of debate, of talking through problems until difficulties were ironed out and agreements to act were reached. That is not to say that their every conclusion was right by our standards. But the Founders did set the example of public deliberations as the model for public participation.

They were, in effect, following Pericles' advice: they thought of talk as an indispensable preliminary to action. Literally, what Pericles said was that the Athenians "taught themselves first" through talk before acting.[1] Talk was the necessary partner of action, and it had a specific function. People used it to teach themselves.

There are even those who would go one step further. They believe that talk is not just a preliminary to action, but a form of action itself. "All talk and no action" is one of the most frequently quoted bits of popular wisdom. Or, to quote a Forum participant from the South, "Talk don't pick cotton." But as Wayne Booth, a distinguished scholar in communications, has pointed out, to speak is to act: to talk reconciliation is to reconcile, to talk fear is to fear. Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher, believed that finding the right word at the right moment was a powerful illustration of how speech is action.[2] If speech did not count — was not action — then any roughly similar word would do. But in many situations any word is not adequate; only the right word will do. Because speech can be action, having the right word is essential.

The theorists who think of speech as action go on to remind us that our speaking can't be done by someone else. This sounds obvious, but consider what it means. Someone can represent our interest, but no one can actually speak for us. *The implication is that democracy must necessarily be both direct and representative.* There has to be representation if policymakers are to govern, but there has to be speech if the public is to do its work.

Forum talk can be a useful preliminary to actions that people will take later on through other organizations, if they use it to teach themselves. Forum talk can also be thought of as a kind of action itself. Thinking of talk as action is a reminder of the need to take responsibility for what we say publicly. If words are considered inconsequential, political overstatements and posturing will abound.

"Working Through" Choices

Public talk is the talk of making choices about policy directions. At the beginning of the chapter it was said "Making choices is hard work; it requires *talking through*, not just *talking about*, public issues." The difference between talking through an issue and talking about an issue needs some attention because it is crucial to the NIF concept of public talk. "Talk about" is what we do every day. We are always talking about the weather, or our friends, or the government. But to "talk through" is very different. You might even call it "working through." You've said it yourself: "We are working through that problem in my business ... in our home." Working through doesn't mean that we are "through" or finished with a problem. It means that we are dealing with our problems in a different way, we are coming to terms with them.

Issues, Values, and Choosing among Options

The NIF books lay out what is really at issue in a policy question, our values — understood as those things that are most important to us, that are the wellsprings of our deepest motivations and the reflections of our mind-sets, our most characteristic ways of seeing the world. "Values," in this context, means those things that are valued by all the means people use to assign value to something.

The term "issue" as used in NIF work needs a bit of definition, too. An NIF issue is not the same as a general topic like health, or a problem that is the symptom of a fundamental policy dilemma (for example, the existence of too many hospitals). Genuine issues — like the soaring cost of health care — engage our most deeply held convictions about what is most valuable. Yet many things are valuable to us and the claims they make on our actions can conflict — both among us as a community and within us as individuals. When it comes to health, we value the best care, and we also want the most affordable care. Yet the better the care technically, usually the less affordable it is. Any policy option for dealing with the

costs of technically advanced health care runs squarely into that dilemma or "issue." Such conflict is what makes policy choices "hard." Yet choice is unavoidable; choices have to be made in order to have a policy. In politics we have to decide. But if we face an issue squarely, we cannot escape the pull and tug that having to choose makes on those things that are most valuable to us. Genuine choice reflects the difficulty of having to decide among policy options, each of which has both positive and negative implications for our ultimate concerns.

The way NIF issue books are prepared involves assessing which of our basic motivations, our most characteristic perceptions, are at play in a given issue. Policy options are then described, not in technical or expert terms, but in terms of the way each option pulls and tugs on the various values at play.

Working through choices requires both an integration of divergent senses of what is of greatest importance into a more coherent form and simultaneously, the use of a resulting sense of what is shareable in our values in order to formulate a set of political actions that add up to a consistent policy. This concept of "integration" of social values into a coherent form that can lead to consistent action is much the same as the concept we have of a healthy personality. We, as individuals, have to integrate our own personal values into a coherent form in order to function effectively. Some people are simultaneously child, parent, spouse, and professional. Each of those roles has its own values and demands on our behavior. We have to integrate them into some coherent form to avoid being pulled apart by conflicting demands. We have to do much the same thing as a political community.

If people don't deal with these underlying sources of potential conflicts in policy options, they run the danger of masking the basis of real conflict — the things that make choices genuinely difficult. The consequence of this failure would be poor definitions of the political problems we face. What the Forums are designed to concentrate on is uncovering those differences that, even when they begin in a clash over facts, reveal deeper sources of conflict. Daniel Yankelovich elaborates:

It will often be discovered that many disagreements which appear on the surface to be disagreements of

fact turn out on closer inspection to mask disagreement in moral judgment and ideology, disguised as factual disparities. What we need to do, then, is unmask the core of moral values that hides itself in the guise of seemingly technical disagreement among experts and researchers.[3]

Unless these senses of what is really valuable, which are drawn into conflict in policy options, are integrated in some coherent fashion, there is no standard for shaping policy. And without a coherent standard, it is impossible to have a consistent policy. Actions prescribed by an inconsistent policy will take us in divergent directions. We vacillate or contradict ourselves when policies are internally inconsistent. The function of public talk is to "help the public discover latent contradictions and commonalties in what it wants to achieve."[4]

To be more concrete, in the illustration on the health issue, the value we place on both good care and affordable care requires navigating through a tension created by holding both values simultaneously. It requires recognizing consequences of both. What additional costs for expanded health care would we be willing to bear in light of other priorities that would have to be sacrificed? How many restrictions would we tolerate on medical practice in light of the value we place on the individual's freedom to choose?

We find benchmarks to chart a policy course by clarifying what our values mean in very specific contexts. Our values become clearer and take on new meaning when we see them in juxtaposition with one another. Public talk is the talk we use to get such clarity — and more, it is the talk we use to create an idea about how to link specific political actions together so that they form a consistent pattern, one that will result in a consistent policy.

NIF options and the exercise of reacting to them "instruct." To paraphrase Pericles again — the issue books are exercises for the public to use in teaching itself. The day after a Forum, people have to go about the usual business of reacting to specific political proposals — local school issues, state tax levies,

national defense initiatives. But the hope of the NIF program is that people will make those decisions with a different appreciation of values, choices, options — and their relation to one another.

Of course, all the conceivable policy options will not yet be on the political agenda. What is often absent are those options that go beyond preexisting preferences. Political imagination is required to see the yet-to-be-enunciated option. But even options that the public adds to the Forum discussions will touch on divergent senses of what is valuable and will still require "choice work."

Working Through: Dealing with Expectations and Consequences

The term "working through" is used for choice work because, as people begin to face political realities and contradictions in their own views, they often react with a sense of shock and loss. Daniel Yankelovich believes "working through" is an appropriate way of understanding the public's reaction to policy dilemmas because they confront people with realities that are a severe blow to their expectations. He explains "working through" in this way:

> *Think of a person in a state of shock because he has lost a cherished goal or object: for example, a man in his mid-fifties who had been expecting to retire comfortably at age sixty-five, then learns abruptly and accidentally from people he mistrusts that the pension which he had long been counting on has been taken away from him. At first, he will be angry, anxious, depressed, confused, incredulous, suspicious, and thrown off balance. A year or two later, he will have regained his composure. The harsh reality will not have changed: he has indeed lost his pension and his*

chances for a comfortable retirement; but his state of mind is not what it was immediately following the loss. He is now more reconciled to the new condition. He has changed his retirement plans, scaled down his expectations. He may still be angry, but he has reoriented his thinking about the future and is again in control of himself.[5]

Because choice work touches our emotions as well as our intelligence, it engages the whole of us. Yankelovich also describes working through as a process that is more than "a mere ingestion of facts, information, and analysis."[6] For him a Forum discussion should be one "that is so active and effective and highly charged that it leaves none of the participants untouched or unchanged. At the conclusion of such a dialogue no participant is quite the same person he or she was before the dialogue began." That should be the case because *working through an issue involves understanding the consequences of what we favor, on the lives of others.*

This kind of public talk, Yankelovich notes, "presupposes that people will leave themselves sufficiently open to hear other viewpoints as well as to present their own viewpoint."[7]

The Rules of Choice Work

Choice work has its own set of rules for proceeding effectively. Keith Melville, editor-in-chief of the NIF issue books, lists eleven:

John Kennedy said, "To govern is to choose." We might say the same thing of the obligations of a thoughtful citizen — to govern ourselves is to choose. It is not sufficient to complain, to declaim, or to peddle one's favorite nostrum (especially if

Rule 1:
The basic task is to move toward a choice.

it's the tired old belief that the sole reason why government isn't doing everything it should be doing is because of waste, fraud, and abuse). It is necessary to consider the range of realistic alternatives and to decide on a policy or direction to take. This is a very demanding assumption. We're asking Forum participants to set aside their normal inclination to comment from the sidelines about what elected leaders are doing. That presumes a willingness to learn about the policy alternatives, and a willingness to consider their costs and consequences as well.

Although we generally address topics that are already visible, it cannot be taken for granted that people will share a sense of urgency about the importance of doing something about the problem. There are various reasons why people may not agree that a problem is urgent. But without a sense of urgency, it's unlikely that even the best of moderators can persuade a group to stay with a problem. Similarly, it is essential that there be agreement about the nature of the problem.

Rule 2:
Groups must begin with a shared sense of urgency and must have a common agreement about the nature of the problem.

It should be said here that while the NIF issue books structure issues in the form of public choices, the Forums themselves are conducted with the understanding that the participants are the ultimate judges of what is at issue. Certainly the way a problem is defined is crucial. As one Forum leader said on an agriculture policy issue, "It makes all the difference in the world whether the issue is framed as a

farmer's problem (which affects only a small percentage of the population) or as an issue of rural viability (which touches the millions of people living in rural areas)."

National Issues Forums are different from meetings where one person, defined as an expert, talks to others, who are defined as amateurs. For "working through" to take place, it is essential that the setting be impartial, that no one person's views carry special weight.

Rule 3:
Both the setting and the moderator must be impartial.

This third rule might be strengthened with this amendment:

For incentive and the building of a sense that people can deal with today's mega issues, let people tell their own stories.

Forum moderators are sometimes bothered by the loquacious recitation of personal anecdotes. But this form of storytelling can be a useful tool in working through. Storytelling lowers the threat of a seemingly "beyond me" issue. It says that personal experiences, and the person having the experiences, are valuable. It binds the personal and political. It reveals values inherent in the stories. And it creates a common language and style of talking. Here is the way a student of storytelling, Melvyn Hill, explains what it can do:

Thinking about an experience requires that we remember it and recount it to ourselves. This invariably takes the form of telling a story. Telling the story, then, is the "thinking completion" of the event, it is the form of dialogue in which I think with myself about what has happened....

Storytelling must be understood not just as the primary form of thinking about experience, but also as the primary form of communicating with each other about experience. It makes possible the sharing of experience and reality.[8]

If participants are to grasp the problem and understand why certain alternatives that may be plausible are unrealistic, they need some factual background. The point is not to create "instant experts," which in any case is an unrealistic goal. The important thing is to identify which facts are essential in understanding the issue. Learning these basic facts is often the key to a clearer conception of the problem, and a precondition for moving toward alternatives new to participants.

Rule 4:
People need a package of essential facts in order to approach an issue.

The main point of these Forums is not the imparting of facts, even though many policy experts often give the impression that the "facts" are the essentials in debating civic issues. The truth is, most political issues cannot be resolved by addressing them mainly as technical, factual matters. Discussion shouldn't be derailed by addressing issues as if they were. The most important thing to grasp about each policy alternative is the kernel of convictions on which it is based.

Rule 5:
The most important thing to grasp when considering alternatives is their underlying values.

An important reason for the "choice format" is to impart a better understanding of the rationale for various choices. It is essential in such discussions that participants begin by articulating their own view. It is equally important that, in the course of reading and discussion, they come to understand the rationale for alternative views.

Rule 6:
Recognize that people who disagree with you have reasons for their choices.

This is a corollary to the previous point. Every realistic policy alternative has its cost. The job of the Forums is to consider realistic, not just popular, alternatives — with the price tag attached.

Rule 7:
Recognize that there are costs to your policy preferences as well as to those of others.

Many people approach issues with a narrow view of the options. Or they approach issues with options that reflect mainly the familiar Left-Right divisions of the political spectrum. On many issues, the options around which a common ground is most likely to form do not belong to these familiar categories.

Rule 8:
Be open to options that you may not have thought about before; be wary of conventional labels that block full consideration of an option.

It is commonly said that all of the choices which end up on the President's desk are "hard choices." That's true of the issues that we take on as well. If these weren't "hard choices," we wouldn't go to the trouble of addressing them in this way. In most instances, a political decision requires giving up something. The fact is, today — in contrast to the situation that existed in the rapid growth years of the postwar period — most political decisions are about how to share sacrifices, not how to allocate gains. Facing today's political realities involves painful and complex trade-offs, or the decision to defer certain initiatives, however laudable. Coming to this understanding is hard work.

Rule 9:
"Working through" is hard work!

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It is unrealistic to expect that a group of people with different perspectives and convictions can "work through" to even a rough sense of shared judgment over a short period of time. The "working through" process is not the shortest distance between the recognition of a problem and an agreement about how it should be solved. Often, in fact, in the early stages of discussion, the process seems to move in reverse. At the outset of some discussions, before most participants grasp the complexity of the issue, there may be at least a rough agreement about a preferred solution. But as discussion continues, there is less of a consensus than there was at the outset. This can be discouraging, because we would like to move pretty quickly to a commonly agreeable solution. But it is both a predictable and useful stage in the "working through" process.

Rule 10:
"Working through" takes time.

Forum leaders who read early drafts of this book suggested that we stop to emphasize this last point. Working through really does take time. If there are changes in personal opinions, it is much more likely that they will take place after the Forums adjourn, rather than during the discussions. When we are in a discussion, our tendency is to protect our position, and to make the best argument we can to try to convince others. Recognizing that people take time to reflect and change is being realistic. The Forums are not so much the end of a process as the beginning.

Here is Keith Melville's final rule:

If participants don't believe that their hard work in trying to reach a considered judgment on issues makes any difference to anyone else, they're far less likely to stay with it. Accordingly, it's essential to have a credible "feedback loop" to local and national leaders as an incentive.[9]

Rule 11:
People need an incentive to engage in such hard work, like the incentive of knowing that someone in a position of influence will pay attention to the outcome of their Forums.

This eleventh rule sparks a lively debate because of a question it raises. Is the implication that public talk is worthless unless policymakers listen? Is the implication that citizens should take on the role of policymakers and be restricted by the framework in which policymakers operate? These are not the assumptions of the Forums. In a democracy, people talking to one another can be as important, or more important, than people talking to policymakers. But speaking practically, if citizens expect to engage policymakers in a way that goes beyond politeness, they have to demonstrate their understanding of the hard choices involved in making political decisions. Otherwise, policymakers are not likely to believe that the public has done its work. Officials often criticize the public for wanting everything and being unaware of the conflicts in its demands.

The Stages of Working Through

> The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular, powers are improved only by being used.
>
> —John Stuart Mill[10]

One of the responses to these eleven rules of choice work is that they describe the ideal more than the actual. No Forum moderator has ever reported a discussion that met all the criteria. Forums can't be successful if the discussions violate all of Keith Melville's precepts; if they are dominated by personal campaigns for special interests, moral posturing, airing wish lists, and reciting personal grievances. Yet, all of these things occur even in the best of Forums. They seem to be necessary first steps in working through an issue. Experienced moderators say that progress in moving beyond the predictable first stages can be seen in the way participants listen and react to others' stories. Most Forum participants begin to talk by relating their own experiences. When they begin to listen to others and nod or frown, then they are beginning to work through an issue. When people are fully engaged in working through, they use the words and stories of other people in their own comments.

Informing Public Choices

The rules of choice work are unquestionably demanding, in large part because they force us to make *informed* choices. This discussion of choice work cannot be completed without looking more closely at what it means to inform the public's choosing.

Keith Melville believes that facts are important. But whose facts? And how many of them? Even if the essential facts have been made available, can we be sure that people are up to mastering them?

In ancient Greece, when Pericles said that although only a few originated policy, everyone was able to judge it, there were undoubtedly disbelieving murmurs among his listeners. Assorted "guardians" have been convinced for some time that people are not able to make sensible choices. In our busy, on-the-go American society in particular, we may never have the time to become informed. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville suspected that the people could never find time nor means to inform themselves about important issues and so they were bound to make hasty judgments. He wrote:

Anyone who undertook to go into everything himself could give but little time or attention to each question. He would keep his mental faculties in a state of perpetual excitement, which would prevent his going deeply into any truth or being firmly convinced of anything at all.[11]

These conclusions were the antecedents to the pronouncements of Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. As we reported in the second chapter, he argued that the citizen "lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct." Lippmann believed that public decisions were inevitably faulty because the public was always ill informed.

When questions are raised about the public's capacity, Thomas Jefferson's remarks are frequently recalled. In 1820, Jefferson wrote in a letter to William Charles Jarvis:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their

control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.[12]

In establishing our government, no one ever assumed that public participation, in and of itself, would give us good government. It was the quality of participation that was the key! The "discretion" of the people has to be informed. It was not participation by itself but *informed* participation that was the foundation for our democracy. So the question is: How are we to get that information — and what is the information about?

Facts Are Not Enough

These days we may operate on the assumption that "informing our discretion" goes on rather automatically. We may assume that, since people are generally educated and since we have newspapers and channels 2 through whatever, all is well. It is true that, thanks to television and newspapers, we have more facts per citizen than we ever had before. But is the accumulation of facts, by itself, evidence that the collective wisdom of the citizenry has grown richer?

As Keith Melville's earlier comments indicate, he believes that it's not enough that many Americans are inundated with information about public issues — information provided by the press, special interest groups, and TV news shows. He sees a job to be done that goes beyond disseminating facts. His point is that the news doesn't tell people all that they need to know about an issue.

- He contends that most media communications consist of discrete messages, or bits of information, even on subjects that are highly complex.

- And he worries that very little of the news helps people to understand the public's choices — choices defined, discussed, and illustrated from the citizen's perspective.

Based on his experience in tracking public policy issues over many years, Daniel Yankelovich credits the press with being good at raising the public's consciousness but not so good at getting people to think and talk through issues:

> *Issues of public importance always seem to go through three phases. The first is when the public becomes aware of a problem, the phase of consciousness-raising, if you will. The second is the time of "working through." And the third is that of political compromise, when some resolution is hammered out. American culture is terrific at consciousness-raising. If anything, we overdo it. The media is good at beating the drums and getting everybody excited. Then they go on to the next issue as though that were the end of the job, leaving everybody in a state of high anxiety and unenlightenment. In a democracy that is a disaster; it maximizes public awareness and public ignorance at the same time.*
>
> *To be excited about an issue but fail to think it through makes for the worst kind of citizen. A state of moral frenzy is not public judgment.*[13]

James W. Carey, dean of the College of Communications at the University of Illinois, prefers an earlier, and he believes, better notion of the role of the press than the prevailing assumption that the press is only responsible for giving the public "the facts."

[The press] — its freedom and utility — was not an end in itself, but was justified in terms of its ability to serve and bring into existence [the public], an actual social arrangement, a form of discourse, and a sphere of independent, rational, political influence.[14]

Carey prefers a journalism that sees its role in relation to public deliberation. His is a model in which journalists are partners with the rest of us. Journalism should preside within the conversations of our democracy; it should stimulate, organize, and keep the dialogue — as well as leave a record of it.[15]

Across the country, the television stations and newspapers that have worked with their local Forums seem to be charting a course that Carey would applaud. In their work with Forum groups, there is evidence of a media role that goes beyond relaying and translating facts. These news organizations appear to put a high premium on the quality of the conversations in their communities and on what they can do to stimulate, enrich, and connect those conversations.

But what about what has been traditionally considered the proper basis for informing the public — expert knowledge? As Carey points out, the media did not just change the role they played; they changed the definition of what was news. The media subscribed to the modern notion that scientific, objective facts — the kind of facts experts have in ready supply — are required to inform the public's discretion. Is the counterclaim that facts are unimportant and expert knowledge undemocratic?

There are too many vivid examples of groups of people pooling their ignorance, giving way to shared prejudices. Yet there are political theorists who go so far as to argue that expert knowledge cannot solve political problems. Here is what Hanna Pitkin and Sara Shumer say on that point:

Expertise cannot solve political problems. Contemporary politics is indeed full of technically complex topics, about which even the educated feel

horribly ignorant. But on every politically significant issue of this kind, the "experts" are divided; that is part of what makes the issues political. Though we may also feel at a loss to choose between them, leaving it to the experts is no solution at all....

While various kinds of knowledge can be profoundly useful in political decisions, knowledge alone is never enough. The political question is what we are to do*; knowledge can only tell us how things are, how they work, while a political resolution always depends on what we, as a community, want and think right. And those questions have no technical answer; they require collective deliberation and decision. The experts must become a part of, not an alternative to, the democratic political process.*[16]

The reason that expert knowledge is not enough, and the main point of this quotation, is that *politics is about uncertainty*. Issues become political issues when there aren't enough facts to be certain about what we ought to do. To miss that point would be to misunderstand the nature of politics.

> ...The need for politics arises when some *action* of *public* consequence becomes *necessary* and when men must thus make a *public choice* that is *reasonable* in the face of *conflict* despite the *absence of an independent ground* of judgment.
>
> —Benjamin R. Barber[17]

Public Knowledge

What is there beyond the facts? One answer is that beyond the technical facts themselves is what the facts mean to different people, with different values, in different circumstances. Beyond particular facts, there is also knowledge of the whole — of interrelations and the way things fit together and the consequences that flow from important interrelations. And beyond what you or I know as individuals is what we know as a community. *This kind of knowledge that goes beyond factual data was referred to earlier as public knowledge.* It is a unique sort of knowledge, created only when we are together. What the Forums begin with are the facts in the books, but what they generate and use —along with the facts — is public knowledge. It is this shared knowledge that informs what Thomas Jefferson called the people's "discretion."

> When politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone.
>
> —Michael J. Sandel[18]

The claim that there are things we can know when we are together — but never alone — does seem a little like political science fiction. Perhaps taking this idea step-by-step will make its meaning clearer. That different facts mean different things to different people is conventional wisdom. The smoke out of the factory furnaces means a job to the employee, but acid rain damage to the environmentalist. That differing values give different meaning to the same facts is not hard to believe either. And that there is a knowledge of the whole of things that is more than knowledge of the particulars, is only slightly debatable. Certainly, it is hard to know all of the interrelations of policy issues. Yet few doubt that economic policy affects defense policy or that the choices we make about funds for schools have impact on the choices we can make about funds for government services. It isn't that we don't realize these relationships exist but we do have a national habit of

treating issues in a vacuum. We like to put them in separate categories, domestic or foreign, social or economic.

Public knowledge is the combined product of the "facts" and the meaning the facts have for different parts of the community. It is a knowledge of the whole of things and their interrelations which is made possible by bringing together multiple perspectives — views from all angles. Because the Forums try to generate public knowledge rather than just disseminating "facts," they address three, often interrelated, issues each year. Public knowledge is not a form of instant wisdom. Three issues each year, over a number of years, provide a basis for seeing reciprocal relations.

> A people's capacity to govern itself democratically is thus proportionate to the degree of its understanding of the structure and functioning of the whole social body.
>
> — Arthur Koestler[19]

To illustrate the knowledge that is dependent on human participation, it might be useful to return to the image of a committee of people surrounding a building, trying to decide what the building was really like and should be used for. An expert could give them useful technical data and it could be distributed (in that sense shared) with everyone. But that would not resolve the political issue facing the committee. The question of what the building really was cannot be separated from the question of how the building appeared to them — and what they should do about it. Only by sharing and combining individual perspectives and extracting from that new, integrated information can the committee proceed to a conclusion. Public knowledge is like the integrated information that derives from what the people on the building committee see and think. Its very existence is dependent on human participation.

> We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness; we get wholeness only through reciprocal relations, through infinitely expanding reciprocal relations.
>
> — Mary Parker Follett[20]

Furthermore, knowing what *we* believe, what *we* think, requires intense interaction because that knowledge doesn't exist until we come together. The public becomes the expert in that kind of knowledge because the public creates it. This knowledge is the best meaning of the term "common sense." We have all contributed to it and shared in it. Common sense is the sense of things that we have in common. *Democracies depend on the results of common deliberation and on the common sense they produce.*

Political philosopher Ronald Beiner has pointed out that while we, individually, may feel less than a match for complex issues, we (as a public) don't depend on any single one of us — but on all of us together. The way we can understand the impact of issues on ourselves, on others in our communities, and on other issues in our communities gives us a breadth of knowledge that no one person, however expert, can match. Our strength is the strength of what we can know together:

> *Common deliberation remedies (or at least mitigates) the imperfections of democracy. Each is imperfect in the judgments he forms by himself, yet "when they all meet together, the people display a good enough gift of perception" ... And it is general knowledge of this sort that characterizes participants in the political assembly....*
>
> *The comprehensiveness of political deliberation surpasses the limited perspective of the expert, and the breadth of survey commanded by the Many in deliberation exceeds that of the few possessing expertise.*[21]

Beiner's concept of the power of "Many in deliberation" can be reassuring to a person wondering whether public forums make a difference. But it can also dull one's sense of importance. In a country the size of ours, what one person does or doesn't do might seem insignificant. Mary Follett in *The New State* had a marvelous analogy to remind people of how important and irreplaceable their own contribution was. A citizen, she said, was like a key on a piano; the value is not in being $^{1}/_{56}{}^{th}$ of all the notes, but in its relation to the other notes. If one note is missing, every other note loses something of its value.[22]

> No one ever talks freely about anything without contributing something, let it be ever so little, to the unseen forces which carry the race on to its final destiny. Even if he does not make a positive impression, he counteracts or modifies some other impression, or sets in some train of ideas in some one else, which helps to change the face of the world.
>
> — Edwin Lawrence Godkin[23]

Opinion Is Not Judgment

Perhaps the most unusual feature of the NIF model is the distinction it makes between opinion and judgment — more precisely, between mass personal opinion and public judgment. *Judgment is not thought of as being the same as opinion.* The Forums are designed to help the public move from personal opinions to shared judgments.

What the people on the hypothetical building committee brought from their initial, personal observations was a form of opinion. It reflected what they saw and felt. Opinion, in this case, was a perspective, a point of view on a matter of uncertainty. If the opinions were added up or aggregated to find the opinion that was most dominant, the result would be mass opinion. But the perspective that

emerged when people shared and integrated their experiences and worked through choices was judgment — public judgment.

Mass opinion, as we see it in polls, is usually time-bound; it is like a snapshot of an avalanche. Public judgment on the other hand, is continuous. The sharing and working through have to be continuous because the participants and particulars are always changing. Public judgment (as a perspective) is certainly an outcome but it cannot be separated from the ongoing process — public judging — by which it is formed. The Forums are exercises in judging, and their eventual products are shared judgments.

Public judgment can be distinguished from mass opinion in several other ways: public judgments are shared. They come out of a community of deliberation. They involve reasoning together. Public judgments are reflective rather than reactive. For this reason, Forum groups should spend considerable time assessing the interrelations of their many interests, the long-term consequences of actions, and the effects of a single policy on diverse people. Public judgment differs from opinion, too, in that it comes from the integration rather than the aggregation of diverse points of view. As groups think and reflect together, as they begin to sort out their values and work through the hard choices, they develop new perspectives — new in the sense that they are more than the aggregate of existing opinions. These new ways of appraising a policy option are made up of many different angles of vision. By seeing things from more than one side, people see the whole differently.

There is some, but not a great deal, of literature on the concept of public judgment and the distinction between it and opinion.[24] But the differences are very important! There is certainly a great difference between a forum that informs individual opinions about particular issues and a forum, like those of a National Issues Forum, that attempts to develop the capacity for public judgment in a group of people working together.

Advocates of opinion research claim that surveys offer fast and accurate determination of the will of the people. The latest technologies, such as interactive television and new ways to measure audience responses to political messages,

make instant opinion very powerful. Yet some of our leading students of opinion research have pointed out the limitations of that research and have made a sharp distinction between public opinion and public judgment.

> *Public opinion has come to mean what public opinion polls measure: the vagaries of the public viewpoint at a moment in time, however vague, confused, ill informed and clouded with emotion it may be. Public judgment, on the other hand, represents the public's viewpoint after all elements of mere opinion have been distilled from it. Public judgment reflects the public's viewpoint once people have had an opportunity to confront an issue seriously and over an extended period of time.*[25]

The concept of judgment has been made much richer by works on politics such as those of Hannah Arendt. She insisted that judgment requires more than being together and listening to other points of view. It calls for us to go beyond seeing others as we see ourselves — as if we were all alike. The challenge in judgment is to appreciate how something would seem to people *different* from us. To Arendt, judgment was:

> *... our ability to look at the same thing from the perspective of other people.... By the utterly mysterious power of the imagination, that strange ability to make present what is absent and to make ourselves absent from our immediate presence and present to some absent perspective, we are able to put ourselves in the other's position and see, not as*

he sees, but how it looks to us from his point of view.[26]

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant had described this same ability to see things in place of someone else as "enlarged thought." We call someone a man of enlarged mind, Kant said, "if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others)."[27]

We might add, "place himself at the standpoint of others — *but without trying to become someone else*." What is called for is going beyond just being sympathetic. When we say, sympathetically, "I feel your pain," we have put ourselves in the place of someone. Judgment requires us to do more. We have to take ourselves with us into another's situation, but still respect the difference between us and others. When we do, we might say, "If I were you, I would feel very hurt." The reason this distinction is important is that it keeps us from the politically disastrous assumption that everyone is alike.

Judgment, according to Arendt, requires certain intellectual competencies that go beyond being well informed or being able to think critically. Arendt argued that judgment requires a kind of public or representative thinking — the ability to think *together*. Representative thinking begins with an openness to the widest variety of viewpoints. But those many points of view have to be synthesized. And that requires more than personal logic, or being rational. The difference, Arendt maintained, is that reason requires us only to be "together with ourselves," individually, to follow our own rules of logic. But judgment requires us to be "together with others." Judgment requires not just the perspective of our own logic but multiple perspectives.[28] The task is not just to be consistent personally, but to be coherent socially.

The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process

which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself ... in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement.[29]

Finally, judgment can be most fully understood when thinking about it in relation to the quintessence of politics — uncertainty. Judgment is required precisely where we don't have the luxury of certainty. We call on judgment most when we must deal with questions that can *never* be answered by knowledge alone. We may know all the facts about MX missiles, but whether they are a wise investment of public monies depends on considerations that go beyond those facts. For example, what is our concept of security: superior strength? deterrence? isolation? Because we are facing such matters that go beyond what the facts can tell us does not mean, however that we are excused from making political decisions. In the face of extreme uncertainty, developing shareable judgments is not idealistic at all — it is arguably the only practical recourse we have.

To be sure, making political decisions in the light of uncertainty is extremely difficult. But what people have to rely on is a wisdom informed by judgment. It is what the Greeks called practical wisdom. It means far more than just being practical. Such wisdom is rooted in common sense.[30] Common sense "discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world...." In other words, common sense (or rather, the sense we have in common) can help us understand the political world, because it is made up of those things that are common to us all.[31] We can have a shared sense of what that world is because it is shared by everyone. That does not imply that we are all basically alike. We are very different and can never know exactly as others do. But we can *comprehend* one another because of a shared humanity.

Such a claim could, however, mean only that we can understand the subjective part of the political world — the world of feelings and emotions. Certainly, we all share certain common feelings — emotions like fear and love — and they influence

our perceptions. As we understand our own emotions, so we are capable of understanding the feelings of others. But people can also share a nonsubjective, object-laden world with one another. Just as we share a common humanity, we share common realities — cities, days of the week, war, peace. And we experience these realities — know them — by means other than feeling alone. The perspective of judgment is not just based on subjective impressions. We use our minds in reaching judgments; we both deliberate and reflect. Our practical wisdom, which grows out of our experiences, *both intellectual and emotional.*

Judgment may not be governed by logical necessity; as we view a work of art, there aren't any rules we can follow to tell us which is the correct perception. But like tastes in art, judgment can be informed and developed. Political judgment requires the discipline of common deliberation and reflection on experience. That is what the people on the building committee did when they came in from the experience of observing the building. And that deliberation and reflection require, in turn, a complex array of intellectual skills, mental attitudes, and powers of imagination.

Thinking about how public judgment is different from personal opinion cannot be completed without thinking about the role of judgment in politics. In politics we don't just know about something; we have to decide! In a word, public judging prepares the public to make political decisions, which are often described as JUDGMENTS. Judgments on what is happening prepare the public to see how to make JUDGMENTS on what to do in political situations. Note that the same word, "judgment," is being used with two different meanings. Up to this point, we have been talking about judging as a way of perceiving reality. Now we are talking about "JUDGMENTS" as decisions.

What we have to do when we make political JUDGMENTS is make good decisions about very particular matters. What should we do with the proposal to finance a new hospital for our community? There are some general considerations to guide that decision: Another hospital would make care more accessible. But one more public hospital could add significantly to our tax costs. The guiding principles which grow out of our values are not in agreement. And what is more, they do not

answer the question about what to do with this particular hospital proposal. We do not know if this hospital fits the case, even if there were only one guiding principle to consider. Without benefit of a formula to plug in to get the right answer, we have to think simultaneously about this one hospital and about the general principles that are relevant. One of Hannah Arendt's students, Elizabeth Minnich, describes the dilemma this way:

> *Judgment is the ability to bring principles to particulars....*
>
> *We have judges in courts of law precisely because we know that the application of rules to individuals without the mediation of judgment is dangerous. For example, if we have a law against stealing which we are to apply to all instances of stealing directly, we will soon find ourselves prosecuting children in the same way we prosecute adults and treating first offenders the same way we treat repeat offenders. The role of the judge — of the person we entrust with the responsibility of exercising judgment — is to apply the law to each individual case such that neither is violated, such that both are taken into account.*
>
> *... One who simply applies rules (learned from experience or from books) to all new situations does not have good judgment; one who is so impressed by the uniqueness of new situations that no past learning (no rules, no generalizations, no principles) seems apt also has poor judgment.*[32]

In everyday language, the question is whether people should make political decisions simply by applying general rules, or whether they should make each

decision on relative merits and what seems best at the time. The answer implicit in the concept of political JUDGMENT is that neither is adequate. What is important in political decisions is how general principles and particular options are brought together. There is no argument being made that the rules or conventions we live by are purely relative. The issue is how we apply the rules. For example, driving at the maximum speed limit on a rain-soaked road, just because the law said the speed could be 65 miles an hour, would be poor JUDGMENT. Obviously what would be better would be to drive at a speed that took into account the conditions of the road. But to be aware of that and other relevant circumstances, to be sensitive to interrelations and consequences of a variety of actions we might imagine (put on our brakes?) requires the kind of inclusive perspective that can come with deliberation and reflection — in a word, from being good at judging.

Serious public talk in the National Issues Forums is to generate the perspectives (judgments) that make sound political decisions (JUDGMENTS) more likely.

Being Practical about Theory

This rather academic discussion of judgment (here we are back to talking about "perspectives") may leave you with the sense that to have a successful NIF program is beyond realistic expectations. No one has reported clear evidence of opinion turning into judgment at the end of a Forum. The purpose of contrasting working toward judgment with the traditional way of informing opinions through "facts" is to describe a more ideal model. But ideal does not mean unreal.

To repeat what has been said before, so complex a process as described in this chapter is not likely to happen in one or even several meetings. Still, Forum leaders report many indications that a group can move beyond an exchange of opinions. Here are some:

- Evidence of more open attitudes, a willingness to consider other opinions. "Let's hear what she has to say."

- An appreciation of points of view that are different. "I don't agree, but I can understand your reasons and your perspective."

- A movement from first opinions to second opinions. "On second thought, I may not disagree so much with...."

- The ability to grow from the contribution of others. "After hearing what you said I...."

Moving from opinion to judgment takes a great deal of time. Judgments only emerge after long periods of confrontation and public debate. It is important to keep the work of the Forums in the content of this larger debate. These Forums were designed to be exercises, and one exercise in a gym won't accomplish what a regular exercise program will.

What is more, people go on talking after they have left the Forums; often, they go to other forums. The influence of these Forums radiates. The National Issues Forums are meant to set new standards for public talk. They were never thought to be *all* of public talk. The Forums fit ideally in that stage of politics that comes after the public has become conscious of an issue and before there is legislative action. They are part, a catalytic part, of the process by which the public works its way through choices and establishes its sense of direction.

The Preconditions for Public Talk

Those who champion public judgment do not, by any means, believe that judgment will inevitably emerge from opinion. There are preconditions or prerequisites that are necessary for judgment to have a chance of developing. Put another way, to be successful, public talk has to have certain characteristics. These are prerequisites to be met for Forum talk to be serious public talk.

First of all, *public talk has to be exploratory.* Its purpose is to discover, and that requires face-to-face conversations. Always having speakers lecture, or a panel of experts expound, runs the risk of inhibiting the people-to-people conversation and the exploratory mood of a meeting. The best public conversations are lateral, with people talking directly to each other. These conversations are just the opposite of vertical conversations where people respond to a central figure.

To this point an important corollary always has to be added: *If Forum talk is exploratory and lateral, then a good part of what has to go on in a Forum is careful listening.*

> While the right to talk may be the beginning of freedom, the necessity of listening is what makes the right important.
> — Walter Lippmann[33]

A second precondition for successful public talk is that *the participants must be diverse and also equal.*

It is difficult to be effective in public talk by talking to people just like us about issues that suit just us. One of the unhappy effects of special interest politics is that much of the talking is done in like-minded groups. That talking is not so much to explore as it is to persuade and reaffirm. The opportunity to persuade and the freedom of associating with those of like persuasion are, of course, as American as apple pie. But getting together to discuss business or labor or agriculture or some particular policy with only those who share our views is not the same as coming together with the larger public to discuss public policy.

The Forums are designed to bring differences and diversity to the surface. One NIF moderator tells the story of women who had been meeting for 20 years as a study circle. They all seemed to have similar opinions on each year's topics. But when they added the Forums to their program and had to face hard choices, they found, much to their surprise, that differences emerged. The newly discovered differences didn't end the group nor did their friendships suffer. But the group did have a very different sense of — and respect for — their diversity.

George Kateb, drawing upon Hannah Arendt, insists that public talk also requires that the participants be equal.

If political actors were not equal, they could not understand each other and work together. If they were not distinct from each other, they would not need words or deeds to make themselves understood.... There could be no political world if individuals were all of the same mind and saw things from the same perspective.[34]

The Greeks learned these lessons long ago. For the first democracies to work, the public assemblies had to be open to every kind of citizen, and every citizen had to have an equal voice in the deliberations. It was these two traits, diversity in participation and equality in speech, that distinguished early democracy from its political competitor — oligarchy, rule by a select few.[35]

A third precondition for public talk is *a place, a public space* in which to "shape the values and ... define the issues that ultimately shape ... [public] policy."[36] Opportunities to reason together, to work through difficult issues, to find out where people can agree — at least to work together — requires a place that "belongs to everyone," that is not the territory of one group or segment of the community. What social historians Harry Boyte and Sara Evans have defined as open, free, or public spaces are environments where "people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue."[37]

In 1919 a journalist, Glenn Frank, upon returning to the Midwestern village where he was born, wrote a very personal account of a public space — the local post office:

I cannot, somehow, withhold myself from the conclusion that the post office method of making

up the mind of a village, state, or nation is superior to the subway method. It is no part of my purpose to suggest that the villager is profound and the city man superficial.... But to this day, when I return to this Midwestern village and go to the post office, I am struck by the original and independent, although badly informed, thinking that is manifested in these free-for-all discussions. These men may wear "hand-me-down" or ready-made suits, but not so their opinions; they, at least, are personally tailored. They do not surrender their day's opinion to the chance impression of headlines. Each for himself as he goes about his work, they mull over such headlines and hearsay information as may have come to them respecting the things that are holding the center of the stage in war, in diplomacy, in politics, and in industry; then later at the post office they lay their minds alongside the minds of their neighbors, they pit their opinions against the opinions of their fellows, and before they get through they have made up the public opinion of the village.[38]

One of the prices of our progress is that there aren't many of Glenn Frank's post offices around anymore. Nonetheless, it is clear that public places for public talking are indispensable. Today there are a great many places for partisan talk. That is not bad. But where are the places for talking about the common ground? Parker Palmer writes:

Our society is deficient in the facilities and opportunities for the interaction of strangers on

which public life depends. We need to do more than berate and bemoan our privatism. We need to help each other discover and create occasions for public experience.[39]

This argument suggests that public institutions of all kinds, from civic associations to colleges and universities, have a special responsibility for providing spaces that can become public. The responsibility is implied in their mandate for promoting public education, that is, an education that helps the public learn its business. The Forums depend on such places — and they can make them truly public.

1 Pericles, "Funeral Oration," pp. 37-40.

2 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 25-26.

3 Yankelovich, "How the Public Learns the Public's Business," p. 10.

4 Reich, "Policy Making in a Democracy," p. 124.

5 Yankelovich, *New Rules*, p. 190.

6 Yankelovich, "How the Public Learns the Public's Business," p. 10.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Melvyn A. Hill, "The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men," pp. 288-290.

9 Adapted from Keith Melville, "Guidelines for Productive Community Discussions," pp. 8-11.

10 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 71.

11 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 434.

12 Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 278.

13 Yankelovich, "How the Public Learns the Public's Business," p. 9.

14 James W. Carey, "The Press and the Public Discourse," p. 11.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

16 Pitkin and Shumer, "On Participation," p. 52.

17 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 122.

18 Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 183.

19 Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, p. 168.

20 Mary Parker Follett, *The New State*, p. 157.

21 Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment*, p. 91.

22 Follett, *The New State*, p. 336.

23 Edwin Lawrence Godkin, *Problems of Modern Democracy*, pp. 223-224.

24 See, for example, Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment* (forthcoming book).

25 Yankelovich, "How the Public Learns the Public's Business," p. 9.

26 Michael Denneny, "The Privilege of Ourselves," p. 264.

27 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.137.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

29 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 220.

30 Beiner, *Political Judgment*, p. 16.

31 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 221.

32 Elizabeth K. Minnich, "Some Reflections on Civic Education and the Curriculum."

33 Cousins, *A Treasury of Democracy*, p. 231.

34 Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 14.

35 See M.I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, pp. 70-96.

36 Peter Dobkin Hall, "The Metapolitical Role of Voluntary Organizations in the United States," p. 13.

37 Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces*, p. 17.

38 Glenn Frank, "The Parliament of the People," p. 402.

39 Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 30.

Chapter Five

TALK AND COMMUNITY

Chapter Four dealt with the nature of public talk. The next two chapters deal with its uses: what public talk does. This chapter concentrates on the role of talk in the democratic community. Chapter Six deals with public talk and the connection between the democratic community and the democratic government.

Town meetings were held in communities. The Forums were designed for communities. Even when Forums are used in educational settings, their purpose is to prepare people for roles they will have in communities. Communities existed before governments. Although the Forums address national issues, "national" does not just mean of importance to the federal government, you will recall; it means of interest throughout the nation. National *is* local in the NIF vocabulary.

Political activity can take place at three quite different stages. In the first stage, our personal interests become bonded to the interests of others. This begins the process of political socialization. In the second stage comes the work of joining together, in large part through talk, to create political communities — to make publics out of what were only masses of people. People in political communities continue to talk in order to act together. In the final stage, governments are created, and public talking serves to influence government. The questions addressed in this chapter come out of the middle stages of politics — when the public emerges from the masses of people, when communities begin to act through public coalitions.

The focus of the chapter, therefore, is on the most basic kind of politics. As we have already noted, the picture most people have in their minds about politics is usually of politics in its later stages as, for example, when national defense policy is being made in Washington. We are all familiar with the structures and processes for that kind of politics. The Administration and Congress are there to act. There are rules and conventions that govern how laws are made. Powerful interest groups lobby.

But recall that in the most elemental form of politics, the question is not *what* to do as much as it is whether anything at all will or should be done. What issues will get on the public's agenda? How will the problems be defined? Will anyone be willing to act? Will it be possible to get enough people together to take effective action? The questions at this level are about what it takes to establish a sense of community or purpose and to get the community moving. Fundamental political questions are questions of purpose and will.

The Forums speak to this basic kind of politics where questions of purpose and will are decided. The public talk they encourage has specific functions in the work of political communities.

What Does Public Talk Do?

The Forums encourage public talk; but what exactly are the functions of that kind of talk?

To begin with, *public talk forms and sustains a political community.* Several scholars have made this point; Lloyd Bitzer, professor of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin, elaborates:

> *One object [of public speaking] is the formation and continuity of community, and this requires the use of arts of communication for the purpose of building bonds of affections and interests among those who comprise a public....*[1]

Benjamin Barber, in his book, *Strong Democracy,* writes similarly of public talk as renewing a sense of community.[2] Both he and Bitzer describe the emotions that they believe are essential to a sense of community. They echo what Theodore Roosevelt said some time ago:

Neither our national nor our local civic life can be what it should be unless it is marked by the fellow-feeling, the mutual kindness, the mutual respect ... the sense of common duties and common interest, which arise when men take the trouble to understand one another, and associate together for a common object....[3]

A second function of public talk, which we noted earlier, is that it instructs. *Public talk teaches.* Part of what we can learn from this talk is a new way of seeing our relations to others — and a new way of working with others. Another political scholar, Carole Pateman, explains how this learning takes place. For an individual to learn from public participation:

... he has to take into account wider matters than his own immediate private interests if he is to gain cooperation from others, and he learns that the public and private interests are linked. The logic of the operation of the participatory system is such that he is "forced" to deliberate according to his sense of justice ... because fellow citizens can always resist the implementation of inequitable demands. As a result of participating in decision making the individual is educated to distinguish between his own impulses and desires, he learns to be a public as well as a private citizen.[4]

Pericles, you will recall, had just such a concept of public talk (as instruction) in mind when he said that the Athenians "taught themselves first through talk" before acting.

A third and fundamental function of public talk is *to create the energy to act together*. The interaction of talking seriously and the stimulus of new perceptions can cause us to have different feelings about one another and the sum of those feelings is a source of civic energy. Even when we disagree on particular issues, we can still feel the bonds created by a common effort to work out our differences. There is a willingness to act together when people see, and feel, that their interests are linked together. Public talk creates public will.

A fourth use of public talk is to *create a public language*. Sociologist Manfred Stanley, in talking to NIF leaders about the concepts central to the Forums, pointed out that people use languages in public discourse that come from the worlds of commodity, technical assessment, and organizational behavior. But these languages are not well suited to public talk.[5] For example, since much of our time is spent as consumers it is not surprising that we think of political goods and services as consumer commodities. The problem is that citizens are not the same as political consumers. A market language assumes that civic discourse can be reduced to a form of civic commerce in which citizens do no more than bargain in a political marketplace. Neither is the language of technical assessment adequate for citizenship. Technical language tends to reduce political issues to technical questions, leading to the misconception that only experts can solve political problems. And the language of organizational behavior, of professions and bureaucracies, tends to reinforce a technical mentality. That also reduces citizens' confidence in their own efficacy.

Stanley believes the language used is crucial because it determines the way problems are defined or named. As pointed out in the previous chapter, to treat the agriculture problem as a farmer's problem blinds people to thinking about the agriculture problem as a problem for all who value a rural life-style. Calling an issue a "farm problem" makes it a farm problem in people's minds. Conversations, and eventually actions, are organized around such perceptions.

What Stanley sees as a challenge for NIF is the task of developing another form of public language with terms of reference appropriate to what citizens have to do as citizens. This, in his view, would not only require getting beyond consumer,

technical, and organizational frames of reference, it would require getting beyond conventional civic language which is territorial. People talk as citizens to protect themselves from intrusion. When we talk that way our language is full of references to "them" — outsiders, officials, intruders of any form. It is a language of crisis and immediacy. Such a language is too limited for discussions of long-range issues, problems of choice, and matters of judgment.

Lloyd Bitzer sums up the uses of public talk in this way: The functions of "rhetorical communication," he says, are to "enrich the public's information, sustain its experiential knowledge, and provide modes of debate and discussion needed for intelligent decision and action."[6]

Talk and Problem Solving

Beyond the functions of bonding, educating, energizing, and creating a citizen's language, public talk is indispensable in the practical business of community problem solving. "Community" here is not an abstract "political community" but the real community where Forum participants live and work. There is quite a debate on what creates effective community problem solving. Why are some communities better at it than others? Or even more puzzling: why is a given community effective in dealing with some problems but not others?

National Issues Forums are not a panacea for solving local problems. But they may be an important part of a civic infrastructure that is essential to effective problem solving. For example, members of one community who had some experience with the Forums as an educational program began working toward a communitywide system of Forums because they sensed that the roots of so many of their problems came from an absence of talking together. So much of the progress they hoped for depended on their ability to make the culture of real discussion a part of the culture of their city.

One clue to what makes effective communities is that they seem to have a unique way of understanding how the public educates itself in the community's business.

An effective community educates itself as a *whole,* in all of its subdivisions, about the *whole* of its interests. An educated community is not necessarily the same as a community of educated individuals. Effective communities seem to think about the education of their towns the way you would think about teaching football — as opposed to tennis. In football you train a person to be aware of more than what's happening on the other side of the line. It is important for these players to know what's going on to the right and left, and even behind them. They have to know much more than a single tennis player needs to know about lateral relationships. So community policy education has to provide a picture of the whole, of how the parts fit together. It is not about topics, but about interrelations.

Communities don't usually work through their problems successfully until they have talked through them. What programs like NIF can do is start the talking and set the standards for talk. For example, one neighborhood organization that has used NIF issue books for a number of years reports that the standards set by the Forums have made it difficult to revert to old patterns of talking "about" issues. The Forums should encourage communities to see problems in terms of genuine choices (rather than technical solutions) and to go beyond complaining and blaming. Forums are there to create new perspectives on people, on relationships, and on people's relations to their community's problems.

Effective communities have certain strengths and capacities that seem to result from their education. They are better at the first step in problem solving — defining the problem. A great many problems don't get solved because we don't take enough care in deciding what the problem is. We often hear people say that "everybody knows what the problem is." Actually what everyone knows is usually just his or her experience with the problem. "The problem" can also easily be confused with someone's preferred solution. "The problem" is sometimes that others are not doing what *I* think should be done.

Communities that do not take the time to define problems in ways that most everyone can accept, quickly lapse into "solution wars." Those are the wars that come about when groups seek to resolve problems with only cursory attention to identifying them. Communities have been known to spend their energy debating

over which solution is best, unaware that there is no agreement on the nature of the problem. For example, widening a road can be defined as a problem of access if I am a merchant dependent on traffic, or as a problem of intrusion, if I am a homeowner with property nearby. How the nature of a problem is understood varies with the people's circumstances and interests. A broad and shared definition of a problem doesn't always guarantee a solution; interests will still differ. But we can't even begin to agree on solutions until we have a common definition of the problem, one that reflects an understanding of our own interests and the interests of others, too. That is not possible without taking time to clarify needs and interests and to see where they diverge and converge.

A problem exists in a group not because people are pressing for different solutions but because none of the solutions that are being considered or advocated meet all people's needs. Conflicts, in other words, lie in the apparent inability of the group to meet diverse needs of its members on some issue. The continual fight over solutions is a symptom that all members' needs will not be met if any of the solutions being considered is adopted.[7]

Usually problems are defined in such a way that there are opposing options and opposing sides. The result is that if one faction wins and its solutions are accepted, the other faction inevitably loses. Of course, no one believes in a world where everyone always wins. Resources are limited. No one solution will serve differing interests equally well. Yet interests and resources can sometimes be realigned so that the variations in interests are better aligned with the variations in resources. The key, again, is in how problems are defined. The function of public talk is to cut through the stalemates created by the polarization of people and issues with redefinitions of problems. The clearest illustration of this possibility is in a story about two people who were told they had to share an orange that they both wanted.

The conventional wisdom would have had them cut it in half. But they discovered, through talking, that one wanted the pulp for eating and the other one needed the rind for cooking. Talking led to a redefinition of the problem and to a resolution that did not exist before the two had talked.[8] In this case the parties found a common solution *because* their objectives were different. Different objectives don't preclude common action.

Public talk can serve to redefine and accommodate conflicting interests rather than to just adjudicate and divide among them. This transforming role of the public has been documented in studies of local community problem solving:

> *Systematic studies of community-based citizen participation have documented instances where it has resulted in "more creative solutions to problems, better coordination of services in a neighborhood, or positive changes in administrative procedures."*[9]

Redefining problems can also have potent political effects. People become invested — or not — in a problem by the way it is defined. It either becomes "our problem" or "someone else's." The best kind of public talk gives people a sense of ownership of issues. It makes them stakeholders in their communities. The concept of problem solving through problem redefinition comes from thinking of politics as more than a zero-sum game and of good solutions as more than the greatest good for the greatest number. The idea of realigning interests with resources has been called a strategy for maximizing "net joint gains" in Lawrence Susskind's studies:

> *Some people think that a good public choice (i.e. community decision) is one that guarantees the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Others judge a public choice to be acceptable only if "nobody is made worse off" by a particular*

public action or resource allocation decision. Still others favor decision rules such as "the gains to the gainers should outweigh the losses to all the losers," or "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." My own view is that all these decision rules are imperfect.

I think we should judge the desirability of public actions and the appropriateness of resource allocation decision from the standpoint of whether or not "net joint gains" have been maximized....[10]

Community education of the kind we are discussing here lays the foundation for another of the characteristics of effective communities; they work through broad coalitions. These coalitions cut across all kinds of lines to draw people together in a variety of alliances and associations. Broad coalitions are made possible by getting everybody involved, early on, in learning the community's business. In a community where a citizens' alliance helped revitalize the public schools, a leader in the group was asked what happened. He reported that the community had been successful because, "everybody in the town was trying to teach our kids." He was describing a broad-based, active coalition that had originated in talk. In that community they were not just acting unilaterally. New partnerships and new forms of collaborations had developed; the churches ran tutorial programs and the businesses supported magnet schools. That is what getting everybody in the town "trying to teach our kids" meant. Coalitions of talk can lead to new ways of perceiving difficult problems. New perspectives can lead to new ways of working together — coalitions for action. A good illustration of broad public coalitions is the broad-based steering committees that have developed around successful Forums.

Broad-based citizen coalitions don't replace local governments. They enhance a community's effectiveness when they supplement governments. Susskind refers to these groups as ad hoc arrangements and argues for the integration of informal, public auxiliaries with formal, governmental structures:

We should be focusing our energies on the design of ad hoc *arrangements in which key stakeholders jointly solve the problems facing them. We also ought to focus on the ways in which* ad hoc *arrangements can be embedded in institutional structures that accumulate what we learn and allow us to get better at conflict resolution.* [11]

Why are public, nongovernmental, citizen-based coalitions so essential to strong local governments? In Susskind's view, they broaden the base for community decision making so that more of the stakeholders are involved and invested.

Decisions about resource allocation are often made in policy arenas that include only a fraction of the people who stand to gain or lose. For example, environmental standards are set at a national level while the distribution of costs associated with these standards (that fall disproportionately on a small number of localities and individuals) are debated at the local level. The places where the burdens will fall are not known when the standards are set....[12]

Coalitions where all the stakeholders can be included are essential, it is argued, because no representative body, regardless of how inclusive the membership, can represent all of a very diverse community. The thesis here is that key interests cannot be fully represented by general-purpose officials. Some kinds of problem solving require the joining of voices in public talk. Others can represent our interest but no one can substitute for our unique voice. Also, certain solutions come easier through informal groups and processes. Their additional ways of problem solving add to the processes at the disposal of official bodies, which are otherwise limited

to legislating and rule making. These additional means are not just better ways to get individual preferences to government officials.

One further thought: public coalitions are essential because they are reservoirs for political will. Civic energy is a little like water: it needs some structure to hold it, to keep it from seeping back into the ground. Public coalitions can be one of the structures that help move civic energy from one issue to another, from one side of town to the other.

Talk, Power, and Leadership

At the heart of the questions people ask about the usefulness of the Forums is the issue of whether the Forums have any political power. It seems impossible to talk about politics without talking about power. What kind of power do the Forums have? Put briefly, the point of view in this section is that talk which bonds, educates, and energizes is implicitly powerful. Talk that can create new languages, redefine problems, increase net joint gains, and lay the basis for broad-based citizen coalitions is obviously powerful. But public power is different from what is often thought of as power — just as its source, public talk, is different from conventional talk. Similarly, the leadership associated with public power is different from conventional, official leadership.

Susskind, in a discussion with a group of NIF participants on concepts of power, offered these definitions of public power:

1) The Power of a Good Idea — involving preparation, research, documentation of the need.
2) The Power of Commitment — If I'm prepared to do what I say, and I always do what I say, and you can count on my doing what I say, I will have more power than someone in another group with more people who can't commit.

3) The Power of Information — I have a good idea, and here's the information to back it up.
4) The Power of Relationships — You can build on relationships. Relationships, in my view, are not unimportant to public discourse. Prior connections — where you try to do something for someone — matter.[13]

Most of the power that we're familiar with is formal or institutional power. It's the power of position, the power of money, the power of the authority of law. Those are very formidable powers. But there's one curious thing about such powers. Once we use some of them, we lose them. For example, once we appropriate money and spend it, it's gone. Public power on the other hand — the power of ideas and ideals, of commitments and of relationships — increases as we use it. One idea generates another, one commitment inspires another, one relationship leads to another.

Public power is much like the power of our early covenants, the mutual promises people made in the colonial town meetings. The ordinance on keeping up the fences in Dorchester did not have the force of municipal law behind it. It was based only on personal agreements. But for that very reason it may have had more force than a law from city hall. Behind every effective law in a democracy there is an unstated introduction: "We have agreed..." For example, "NO PARKING" really means, "We have agreed that no one should park here."

The concept of public leadership that follows from this notion of public power is one that defines leadership as a matter of functions rather than status. A public leader is someone who does those things needed to spread ideas, exemplify ideals, build relationships, make commitments. Some are uncomfortable with the concept of leaders because it implies a public of followers. But such an interpretation is not consistent with the theory of public leadership as a set of tasks, demanding, but open to everyone.

Not to have a concept of public leadership leaves Forums leaders — and many other Americans — unrecognized for contributions that are essential to our political well-being. Here is a case in point:

Mr. Montgomery appeared to be in his seventies. He was rather small in stature but in sections of his community quite large in influence. The community was in the Deep South and Mr. Montgomery was black. He had not been a government leader because no blacks in that town had been elected to office in recent history. But he built his own business and, on the side, served as bailiff to the court. And when the 1984 presidential elections brought national candidates to town, he was asked to be in the welcoming delegation at a large reception across town. He got the invitation at the court and hurried from his duties there to the reception hall. No sooner was he inside, however, than two security guards knocked him to the floor! He was hurt physically and deeply embarrassed. He had forgotten to take off the pistol he wore as a bailiff! But what hurt most was that no one in charge knew who he was. Out of the crowd came only a few voices saying "that's Mr. Montgomery." Despite decades of work to benefit the community, despite the recognition of the invitation, he had no badge of office.

Mr. Montgomery said later that he felt he had done a good deal for his community but he never had a name for what he did.[14]

Mr. Montgomery, in the tradition of Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin, was very much a public leader.

> With much care and skill power has been broken into fragments in the American township, so that the maximum possible number of people have some concern with public affairs.
>
> — Alexis de Tocqueville[15]

John Gardner, who has written extensively on the subject of leadership, believes strongly in the idea that leadership is a matter of performing tasks rather than a matter of status. He also believes that we need many kinds of leaders, from all sectors of society, serving at all levels.

If only the president and members of Congress are thought of as leaders with broad responsibilities, the democratic experiment will fail. If we limit our view to those People, Life, *and* Time *magazines think are our leaders, we deny ourselves the benefit of the enormous talents and energies of the great majority of our citizen leaders. Our system needs to have hundreds of thousands of people from the local to the national levels playing their parts in keeping the country going. If we honored those business and labor and civic leaders who learned to act with others out of a common concern for community and nation — rather than those who only fight for their narrow cause — we would begin to build a strong network of leaders.*[16]

The former Mayor of Reading, Pennsylvania, Eugene Shirk, is now a Forum leader in his hometown. He is a good example of a leader playing his part in

keeping the country going. Gene encourages Forums throughout the town; he is a leader who stimulates leadership in others. Civic clubs, the schools, local TV stations, and the newspapers have joined to get much of the town involved in a Forum. The newspaper has run study materials on its pages. Schools and civic organizations conduct the discussions. And at the conclusion, the community television station, with Gene moderating, hosts a report-back to the community from representatives of all the Forums. Some of our best public leaders are people who have "graduated" from positions as leaders of government.

Because public leadership is open to everyone by no means implies that it is easy work. It isn't. There are specific tasks that define the responsibilities of public leaders. Bruce Adams, a commissioner in Montgomery County, Maryland, in his study for the National Association of Community Leadership Organizations, describes public leadership as a form of political orchestration:

The new leaders will be orchestra conductors, calling forth the skills of a variety of players in an appropriate sequence to produce a pleasing and coherent whole adding up to much more than the sum of its parts. The new leaders will empower followers, encouraging us to solve our problems by working together. They will bring us to the same table and get us to talk, collecting human energy to solve public problems. They will listen to our viewpoints and mediate our disputes. They will be skilled at questioning us and drawing from us new views and fresh insights. They will educate the public about problems and issues while identifying the values that hold the community together. And they will not shirk from proposing solutions. They will help us climb to higher and higher levels of understanding.[17]

Another responsibility of public leaders is to conduct the public conversations needed to make democracies work. As Adams observes, public leaders empower themselves "by engaging citizens in democratic conversation — helping to identify the ethical, political, and long-range implications of policy actions rather than tying them in technical and rhetorical knots."[18] Public leaders have been described elsewhere as those who frame issues in terms of fundamental values and "teach" in such a way that those in their community come to find what common interests are.[19]

The responsibilities of public leadership can also be understood to include doing those things that make effective communities effective. Public leadership is taking on the job of educating the community in the community's business. Public leadership is ensuring the quality of public talk. Public leadership is helping a community move from opinions to judgments. Public leadership is drawing people into coalitions for community problem solving that can go beyond the transactions of the political marketplace and the procedures of government. Public leadership is generating those special kinds of powers that are public.

This understanding of public leadership has, as you would imagine, implications for the preparation of public leaders. One of the criticisms of the special interest market theory of democracy is that it offers little in the way of a theory of public leadership — and consequently little in the way of a theory of education for public leadership. If politics is no more than transactions in a political marketplace, political education is limited to teaching the structures and functions of government or case studies on the power of special interests. But in those theories of democracy in which the citizen/leaders and their deliberations are central, the education of future citizens and public leaders changes both in importance and character. The imperatives are for an education in political dialogue (with experience in using our own political voices and hearing the voices of others) and an education in public thinking, (the thinking-together we need to form sound public judgments.) Those are the quintessential skills of a public leader in a democracy.[20]

Talk and Virtue

If, as Bruce Adams suggests, the public leader is an orchestrator, the question follows: Who writes the music; who calls the tune? Are public leaders no more than facilitators? Is the Forum talk they lead just a process unrelated to our sense of what is right in a democratic society? What about freedom and justice, liberty and equity? These rights are so important that the people adopted a Bill of Rights to restrict even democratic government from tampering with them. These laws reflect the most sacred understanding of the basis for a democratic way of life. Some fear that purposeless processes endanger these principles. The worry is as old as Socrates' criticism of the masters of speech, the Sophists. He charged them with being willing to promote persuasion at the price of virtue. We want leaders that take charge, particularly on matters of principle. As Frank Pace Jr., Secretary of the Army under President Truman once said: "When a group is faced with a problem, leaders step out and take responsibility." Robert Coles, a careful student of the Civil Rights Movement, reminds us of the connection between leadership and values:

> *The people who gave us America were people who stood up and said, "I believe what I believe, and I'm ready to die for that faith." Abraham Lincoln did not go to Gettysburg having commissioned a poll to find out what would sell in Gettysburg. There were no people with percentages for him, cautioning him about this group or that group or what they found in exit polls a year earlier. When will we have the courage of Lincoln? The only thing that makes this life worth living is some kind of moral self-respect, which in turn connects with what we believe in.*[21]

We value speech. We also value freedom, justice, equity, and other political rights. We value participation and letting people decide as they will. We also value leadership and sense of moral purpose. How do the Forums reconcile what some would see as disparate objectives? Are the Forums a process devoid of substance?

> If there is anything that makes this country what I have called the crown jewel of nations, it is freedom. I believe that remains so central to our identity that the American people will never tire of it. It is the root value that makes this country comfortable for all of us.
>
> — Barbara Jordan[22]

Perhaps the best way to approach these questions is to recall that the founding generation did not see public talk as antithetical to virtues like freedom. To the contrary! They considered talking essential in the establishment of liberty. That reflected their own experience in the town meetings. Speech and assembly were the first political rights that were recognized. And popular sovereignty's first champions in Europe had, in fact, been champions of liberty and the political rights needed to secure natural rights.

Walter Lippmann, who had concerns about people's capacity for democracy nonetheless saw public talk as a key to making freedom a reality rather than an abstraction:

> *The unexamined life, said Socrates, is unfit to be lived by man. This is the virtue of liberty, and the ground on which we may best justify our belief in it, that it tolerates error in order to serve the truth. When men are brought face to face with their opponents, forced to listen and learn and mend their ideas, they cease to be children and savages and begin to live like civilized men. Then only is freedom a reality, when men may voice their*

opinions because they must examine their opinions.[23]

What is more, speech as a right is different from a right to certain "goods," like property. Donald Meiklejohn argues that speech is itself a *moral* activity.

Insofar as men are, in their communications, developing such public aspects of their lives, they are building the foundation of significant moral activity. Speech is not to be protected as "good" on some particular interpretation of "good." It must be protected, rather, because it constitutes a community, a moral agent capable of good and bad. It makes a public able to be free in the exercise of its mind and will.[24]

Public talk is a moral activity in that it fosters the moral reasoning which is part of choice work and reflective judgment. Our very choice of words, Wayne Booth contends, is a moral choice. The Forum discussions are those in which people talk out of the reservoirs of their own values. NIF issue books identify value considerations in what have become technical policy options. That kind of public exercise stands in sharp contrast to the concept of a democracy in which people compete to maximize their self-interest without any reference to shared values.

Moral reasoning is not, however, moral posturing. It means considering what is good or bad, fair or unfair, in making judgments. It is reasoning, being reasonable, and examining our own opinions as we challenge the opinions of others. In one Forum, a heated discussion of welfare came to a head when one man said, "Any form of welfare is robbery!" He was not just making an academic statement; he was angry. The man across from him was a veteran who had been blinded in combat and had received federal assistance with his education. Contrary to what one might expect, his response was very measured. "If that is all you have to say,

we won't have much of a Forum," was his reply. "Are you at least willing to consider other points of view?" When the man on the right agreed, the Forum changed from sequential moral posturing to moral reasoning.

To sum up the case for a necessary connection between public talk and our political rights, the arguments have been that:

- Public talk is intimately linked to the first principle of our democracy, freedom or liberty. Our liberty grew out of talk just as our talk grows out of our liberty.

- Public talk, and the broader concept of speech, are themselves political rights.

- Talk is a moral activity; it deals with what is of fundamental value to us and calls upon our moral reasoning.

We should add to this list two other points that were made in the section on the preconditions for public talk. They have to do with the value we place on diversity or pluralism and on equity. First, public talk not only presupposes the freedom to speak, it also requires both equity among and diversity in the speakers. Public talk and public judgment need a diversity of perspectives, the perspectives of all kinds of different people. The public voice doesn't mean one voice. Americans love nothing so much as the sound of their own voices. If we don't agree, if our opinions differ, so much the better. The cacophony of these differences is the sound of our freedom. The plurality of all our voices is proof that our own voice still has a place. Public talking is the guarantor of our diversity as diversity is the guarantor that talk will be truly public. We value diversity, our pluralism, in part because we need it for public talk.

In much the same way, public talk both depends on equity and nourishes equity. We value equity, in part, because we must be equal to talk publicly. And when we talk publicly, it creates the environment in which equity can flourish:

Democratize language, give each citizen some control over what the community will mean by the crucial terms it uses to define all the citizens' selves and lives in public and private, and other forms of equality will follow. We may redistribute goods and make power accountable, but if we reserve talk and its evolution to specialists — to journalists or managers or clerics or packagers or bureaucrats or statesmen or advertisers or philosophers or social scientists — then no amount of equality will yield democracy.[25]

Talk and virtue, then, are not at all opposites, one process and the other substance. Public talk and democratic principles have a reciprocal relation. This reciprocity between the values of a democratic society and acts of participating in the democracy was discovered in the earliest observations of democracy. Aristotle wrote:

For if, as is held by some, freedom is especially to be found in democracy, and also equality, this condition is most fully realized when all alike share most fully in the constitution. [26]

Our Constitution, the written embodiment of what we consider our inalienable rights, depends not just on its assertion of rights to be viable, it depends on citizens who know what those rights mean in their political lives. People cannot be expected to follow laws in constitutional abstraction that have no meaning in the practices of their daily lives. *Constitutions have to have citizens.* And they have to have citizens who do more than give legitimacy at the creation of a constitution. Citizens talking freely and in forums where equality of voices is respected is no mere process. It is

the experience of democratic rights that is absolutely essential for a society that wishes its citizens to live by laws that reflect those rights.

Public Talk and Creating the Public Itself

In all that has been written so far about the nature and uses of public talk, one point needs to be emphasized above all others: *Public talk creates the public itself.* And to the extent that the public and political community are synonymous, public talk creates the community. In all the discussion of the particular functions of talk and its role in community problem solving, the most basic of all its basic purposes is that. Neither the public nor the political community can be taken as givens. A group of people is not necessarily a public. A place where people live is not necessarily a community. Even where they are, publics and communities have to be constantly re-created. Yesterday's sense of community will not suffice for today's challenges. Communities depend on a sense of community. People have to be attached, not simply entangled. They have to learn to be public. They have to develop the will, the energy to act publicly. To talk publicly is to transform a place into a community. Talking together is the only way, absent force, to blend a thousand personal interests into a "public." *What the public voice contributes, what it alone produces, is, in the first instance, the public itself.* A democratic community begins with — in fact, it is — a conversation of people talking to one another. If the public is not talking, there is no community.

Repeating this concept of public is crucial. One Forum leader told of trying to organize what she thought would be a very successful Forum on the farm issue in a farm community. To her surprise, one farmer told her, "It's a good idea, but no one will come." When she asked why people were so reluctant to attend, she found out that most everyone thought it would be a waste of time because only the government could solve their problems. For people to lose confidence in the efficacy of talking to one another is to guarantee that their talk will be ineffective.

The discussion of the use of public talk with policymakers in the next chapter should not obscure the point that the most important talk is among people, not between citizens and officials in government. It is a truth that it is as important to policymakers as it is to citizens. If political leaders only hear constituent petitions, no matter how skillfully they listen, they will not hear the crucial conversation of citizens talking to citizens.

Margaret Mead once said never doubt the ability of a small group of people talking together to change history. It was, she said, the only thing that ever had.

1 Lloyd F. Bitzer, "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," p. 80.

2 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 179.

3 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Free Citizen*, p. 64.

4 Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, p. 25.

5 The following points from Manfred Stanley are adapted from his speech at Miami University, July 10, 1987.

6 Bitzer, "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," p. 80.

7 Joseph P. Folger and Marshall Scott Poole, *Working Through Conflict*, p. 193.

8 Max H. Bazerman, "Negotiator Judgment."

9 Redburn and Cho, "Citizenship, Community Life, and Public Policy," p. 6.

10 Lawrence E. Susskind, "Resolving Environmental Disputes Through Ad Hocracy," p. 3.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Adapted from Susskind, remarks made at the Third Presidential Library Conference on The Public and Public Policy.

14 David Mathews, *Reflections on Public Leadership*, (unpublished case reports).

15 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 69.

16 National Association of Community Leadership Organizations, *Exploring Leadership*, pp. 7-8.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

19 Orren, "Beyond Self-Interest," p. 23.

20 David Mathews, "Civic Intelligence."

21 Robert Coles, as cited in National Association of Community Leadership Organizations, *Exploring Leadership*, p. 27.

22 Bernard Murchland, *Voices in America*, p. 43.

23 Clinton Rossiter and James Lare, eds., *The Essential Lippmann*, p. 233.

24 Donald Meiklejohn, *Freedom and the Public*, p. 113.

[25] Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 193.

[26] Aristotle, *The Politics*, p. 250.

Chapter Six

THE PUBLIC AND THE GOVERNMENT

We have all heard people say things like: "The government doesn't listen." "Politicians only need us for our votes." "The bureaucracy controls everything anyway." "The legislature is dominated by special interests; what's the sense in getting together to talk about public problems?" Behind all these comments is one question: "Can the average citizen really influence the government?" If the public has no influence on the government then, to some, a venture like the National Issues Forums seems a self-indulgent activity.

In some ways, it is puzzling that the public is so unsure about its own powers. Perhaps the reason for this is that public power is usually slow-moving and affects long-term rather than short-term interests. Still it is puzzling because so much of recent history was made when the public did exercise its power — most notably in the Civil Rights Movement and the reversal of governmental policy in Vietnam. It is ironic, too, given the history of the public in creating the nation and the Constitution.

Policymakers, for their part, have questions about what kind of public the National Issues Forums represent. Policymakers at all levels of government, both elected and appointed, are involved in the NIF program. Some are part of steering committees. Some regularly attend Forum discussions. Some meet with participants in Washington at the end of the Forum year. But, accustomed to dealing with interest groups, policymakers have questions about how to relate to NIF that reflect experiences with those kinds of public groups. They usually begin by asking, "What did all of you agree to?" "How is it you want me to vote?" Even when Forum participants are identified as having *public* interests rather than special interests, there is still some confusion. Public interest groups usually have a fixed position, a specific policy option that they advocate as being good for everyone,

National Issues Forums do not. When this becomes clear, officials are sometimes puzzled in a new way. "If you don't have a policy preference, then what exactly can I do for you?"

Officials have been quite willing to join in NIF meetings and have been very polite in listening. But what should they be listening for?

The Impasse: Defining What the Public Brings to the Table

Even if the public is sovereign and has a right to be at the "table" of political debate in the country — the central question in its simplest form is, "What does the public bring to the table, other than the constitutional right to be there?" Nothing blocks the exchange between the public and policymakers more than the sense that the public has nothing to offer other than ever-changing opinions. The question, "Is the government listening?" begs a more important issue — "To what?"

At an NIF conference on the public and public policy, cosponsored by and held at the Gerald R. Ford Library, Patricia Henry, a community and business leader from Lawton, Oklahoma, and Richard Cheney, a congressman from Wyoming, were airing their mutual frustrations. Ms. Henry voiced the average citizen's complaint that the government doesn't listen to our views and Dick Cheney described a congressman's dilemma of getting more mail than anyone could reasonably be expected to read. Worst of all, Cheney said, was the assumption that the public really knew what the answers were and that political leaders only needed to listen more closely to avoid making so many "dumb mistakes." Cheney, in his own way, was asking what the public brought to political decision making — other than a right to be heard.

As long as that question is unattended, political debate in this country runs the danger of patronizing the public voice. And good policymakers like Dick Cheney and good citizens like Pat Henry will continue to feel a heightened sense of frustration. Leaders will be frustrated in their attempts to convey the complexities of such matters as energy, the economy, and national security. Many will despair over

the apparent disinclination of the public to acknowledge recent changes in our circumstances, and to grapple with the problems as policymakers have to face them. For its part, the public will sense an increasing threat to its social and economic security, yet feel left out of crucial policy deliberations. Caught between conflicting assessments and prescriptions for complex problems, many people could come to doubt both the competence and the good faith of their leaders.[1]

The Forums are one effort to help the public create an intelligent public voice. The Forums are not a mass of individuals or an interest group. They are groups of diverse people who have worked hard to integrate their different points of view into statements of shared judgments. Forum groups should be able to talk about directions for the country, hard choices, values that lie behind the choices, how they have worked through value conflicts, how different sections of the community react differently to an issue, and where those differing interests diverged and converged. Recall the moderator who reported what had happened in his group by saying: "Here are five statements from my Forum. Not everyone agreed with all of them but there is nothing in them that we couldn't live with." This way of defining the shareable or public interests makes clearer the difference between finding the common ground and reaching total agreement. The public voice becomes not just intelligent but intelligible when groups create statements about interests that are common. Forums should be able to make such statements because they can generate an empathy that causes people to regard others' interests as their own, and because they can articulate beliefs that join divergent interest into a common form.[2]

The importance of the public voice can hardly be overestimated. When the public does not do its job, when there is no shared sense of direction and no definition of national interest, it is difficult, if not impossible, for policymakers to set policy. When the instructions are too narrow, when the public is not open to considering reasonable policy alternatives, the machinery of government is thrown into disarray. Keith Melville points out the serious difficulties that arise when public influence is not sufficiently clear or vigorous:

The problem is that the public arena in which elected officials are expected to find acceptable solutions to national problems has come more and more to resemble a demolition derby. At its worst, ours has become a society in which no one can assemble a majority except in complaint. When the body politic is so splintered, coalitions are hard to come by, and leaders are often unable to convince anyone that certain sacrifices of self-interest are necessary for the common good.[3]

In the absence of an effective public voice, we are left only with the voices of special interests. John Gardner, from his experience as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, speaks vividly about the kind of paralysis that can occur when there is no public — Hobbes' war of the parts against the whole.

Our capacity to frustrate one another through non-cooperation has increased dramatically. The part can hold the whole system up for ransom. To comprehend the paralysis of government as the policymaker experiences it, imagine a checker-player confronted by a bystander who puts a thumb on one checker and says, "Go ahead and play, just don't touch this one," and then another bystander puts a thumb on another checker with the same warning, and then another bystander and another. The owners of the thumbs — the interest groups — do not want to make the game unwinnable. They just don't want you to touch their particular checker.[4]

The Social Security crisis offers a good example of how public talk should help show the way out of this type of special interest stalemate. Social Security was one of three discussion issues chosen in the first year of the Forums, and for a good reason — the system was approaching bankruptcy. The problem was certainly no surprise. It had been coming for years. But the political system was paralyzed. Older people were angry at the thought of any change in Social Security. Younger workers were appalled at the poor return on their involuntary "contributions" to a program that looked as though it might be insolvent by the time they retired. Politicians quickly discovered that proposing any solution was worse than proposing no solution. As a result, no one was doing anything about the situation.

What the Forums did was encourage younger and older Americans to confront hard choices. When younger workers looked at what might happen to their own parents if faced with large medical bills and no retirement income, they tended to change their opposition to mandated contributions. Older participants, seeing that change, often softened their opposition to adjustments in benefits. People began to talk less about what they liked and more about what they could live with. This increasing sense of the common ground gives room for political reforms to emerge. Though not a sample of what all Americans might do, the Forums did point toward the shared judgments that lay beyond polarized opinions, and that were part of breaking the Social Security stalemate.

By moving from opinions to judgments, Forums should help to define, perhaps even create, what is politically permissible. In this way, the public sets the parameters within which successful policy can be made and sustained. This contribution is quite different from the passive act of simply giving permission to representatives to act in the public's name.

What the public brings to the table are the standards and direction needed for governing the country. The responsibility of the Forums is to give a definition of the public interest that goes beyond the aggregation of wants and the reflections of our narrower interests. What they should offer are insights into the "megamotivations" of people.

Policymaking and the Forums

Former President Jimmy Carter, speaking to the Ford Library Conference on The Public and Public Policy, was impressed by the way the Forums had dealt with the Social Security issue. He urged more such programs, not just a doubling of the effort, but an increase "a thousand times over or ten thousand times over." He called the Forums one of the purest examples of American democracy. Former President Ford made similar remarks. A United States Senator saw in the Forums the best tradition of America. For him, "what was revolutionary about America, and the idea which led to America, was very simply, the realization that our most valuable asset was the brainpower of our people — the revolutionary idea that people at the grass roots level were best able to make decisions about their own destinies."[5] A former Cabinet member added: "I see this process [of the National Issues Forums] as one in which the role of the citizen and the role of political leadership are mutually indispensable and mutually reinforcing."[6] Another Senator who is a regular participant in local Forums said he attended each year for a very practical reason — he was asked better questions.

What Kind of Policymaking?

Politicians' observations that "we need to hear from the people" can be dismissed as so much rhetoric. Where exactly does a program like NIF fit into the process of policymaking? If politics is a marketplace, what need is there for any sense of common direction that might come from a Forum? When we talk of policymaking, do we have another kind of policymaking in mind?

The traditional view of how our political system works, we have noted, is that ours is an "adversarial" democracy. We organize into interest groups and compete for advantage. The task of the government is to reconcile the conflicting claims of the various adversaries. Arthur Maass, in *Congress and the Common Good,* calls this dominant theory of politics an interest group theory. It holds that the role of

government is to assist interest groups in the statements of their partisan interests; "to organize a political process for the purpose of aggregating and mutually adjusting these group interests; and to design and implement governmental programs in accordance with the results of this bargaining process." The public interest as defined by this theory, says Professor Maass, is the "... aggregation and reconciliation of those particular interests that assert themselves."[7]

What Maass describes has also been called the market or transaction theory of democracy in this book. The public is the aggregate of interest — as defined by special interest groups and the preferences of individuals for their own economic well-being.[8]

The alternative theory holds that while our policymaking system is observably adversarial in some respects, it is more than that. The system also has to respond to broad public interests and take unified positions that bring interests together rather than just decide among them. In this view, the preference of interest groups and the self-interest of individuals are not assumed to represent all of the interests in the political community. Political scientist Jane Mansbridge's pioneering book, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, describes the political process, in part, as "consensual, based on common interest and equal respect."[9] The key phrase here is "common interest and equal respect." Mansbridge has in mind the democracy of "face-to-face relations." This kind of democracy — Mansbridge calls it "unitary democracy" — is not merely a theory. It can be observed all around us. "Unitary ideals and procedures continue to influence the way legislative committees, elected representatives, major institutions like the Supreme Court, and local democracies actually act."[10]

In this concept of democratic politics, the emphasis is on *transforming* individual interests into common ones:

> *The central characteristic of unitary democracy, which distinguishes it from adversary democracy, is that policy resolution is achieved on the basis of perceived common interests rather than through a compromise that gives equitable protection to different interests.*[11]

The point in presenting both adversarial and unitary models of how the American political system works is not to say that one is good and the other bad, but rather that both can be found at work in the realities of political life. As one study of Congress reports: "Congressional behavior is more than endless wars fought in special-interest jungles, and it is less than a series of leaps from one public-interest mountaintop to another. Much of what goes on in Congress lies somewhere in between."[12]

The evidence, then, is that adversarial, special interest politics is not the only game in town. It follows that those public forums that can describe shared public interests are crucial to a government that has to find, and act in, this broader public interest.

> Through reasonable discussion, through taking into account the views of many, Congress amends and refines legislative proposals so that once a law is passed it reflects the collective judgment of a diverse people.
>
> — Hubert H. Humphrey[13]

The Democratic Community and Democratic Government

Another way of looking at the connection between the public and policymaking is to see the political process as a pyramid of stages, the base of which is the public or democratic community. Arthur Maass describes those stages this way:

The first stage is discussion in the community where the broad standards are agreed on.... The next stages — the electoral process, the legislative process, and the administrative process — are organized by the state. They are the means through which discussion and interpretation of standards

are carried to greater and greater specificity, from general issue to concrete decision.[14]

How do public deliberations fit into the policymaking system? Maass agrees with the proposition that the work of the democratic community is to set the standards or a broad sense of direction for the government. In his scheme of things "the first stage (of politics) is no less than the community's agreements on the standards of the common life, which are of necessity general and broad." Without discussion in the community there cannot, in democracy, be meaningful discussion at the various levels of government. Each stage in politics is dependent on the preceding stage; the work done at one stage is redefined at the next. This concept is the basis of the thesis that democratic governments, at the later stages of politics, can't do their work if democratic communities, at the earlier stages, don't do theirs.

The relevant contributions the democratic community makes to the government are the broader ones — standards and directions. But what gives those standards and directions importance is that they come from a perspective that is reflective of what is good for the community at large, rather than just reflective of individual or factional interests.

A Forum is not a super poll, speaking for all citizens. But the challenge in the Forums is to get each participant to speak "in terms of what he or she thinks is best for the political community."[15] When Forum members are talking to policymakers, they are most effective when they can describe the consequences of their choices for the community.

Forums are one of the ways for the democratic community to do its work. For that reason, the style of the work with policymakers should not be a "report to." Citizens and policymakers are partners, not the rulers and the ruled, nor the majestic public and the lowly public servant. Each has a different but interrelated role to play in the ongoing exchange between the democratic government and the democratic community.

For Policymakers: More than Polling Data

A look at the culture of policymaking and the sort of information that decision makers need suggests how politically relevant the results of the Forums can be. As one study of the U.S. Senate showed, politicians need more than data. What was important to Senators was putting data in a larger context. Their job was the long-range, crosscutting examination of issues.[16] One aspect of understanding the larger context is knowing the values that underlie the data. Another is knowing the political consequences of choices, specifically, the effects on a constituency. As another study of Congress reports:

> *Useful information ... takes account of the political consequences, modifies the information in the light of these consequences, and becomes politically realistic.*[17]

Forum results that show the way values relate to policies, that give some insights into *why* people think the way they do, provide a basis for understanding what will make for long-term policies. And, since values do conflict — and those conflicts force choice among policy options — the Forums should be rich in information about what people would choose when the choices are hard. They can help clarify what happens to public choices when "push comes to shove" and the consequences of choices are apparent. Further, listening to what happens in Forums can be a way of learning what causes public attitudes to change — or what blocks people from thinking afresh about a problem.

In sum, the kind of public information that the Forums should produce on values, underlying choices, and the consequences of choices can be the very kind of information in shortest supply for policymakers.

One government official on the White House staff who spent a great deal of time listening to NIF groups that meet with Congress and the Executive Branch each year was Roger Porter. When asked why he spent the time, Porter said that

although NIF participants did not necessarily have better information on specific subjects, they did have better information on how people saw the interrelation of issues, the trade-offs. He and his staff asked Forum participants questions about how options (low-cost hospital care for everyone) changed under the influence of other considerations ("Would you pay the added costs for a C.A.T. scanner in the hospital in your area, or would you be willing to go to a nearby town?"). Porter explained that groups which have some balance to their views are quite valuable and are much appreciated.[18] As one state legislator said, commenting on the uniqueness of the Forums in his district, "These meetings are one of the few places I can go where I don't know the conclusions in advance."

Policymakers who work with Forums have achieved the best results when they established a partnership. This partnership is based on the Forum first doing its work, leaving the officials to sit in the back and listen rather than leading off with a speech. Policymakers rarely get to hear value conflicts being sorted out in the lateral conversations of neighbors talking to neighbors. When they are put on stage, the conversations become vertical— constituent to leader. At the end of the Forum work, the policymakers respond; but now they can compare the results from their "forums" (a council, or legislature, or agency) with the results from the Forum they have just attended. If political leaders only participate in vertical conversations with citizens, they will miss learning from what citizens say to citizens.

Ideally, communications between citizens and policymakers should move in several directions, "from citizen to policymaker and from policymaker to citizen, and then horizontally among citizens." The reason is not that this is just "good communications"; it can have a profound influence in shaping what people expect. The very act itself, "of seeking to discover what people want and then responding to such findings inevitably shape[s] people's subsequent desires."[19]

The Public as Interpreter of Larger Public Interests

All policy is made in the name of advancing the public interest. But policymakers face a special dilemma when it comes to deciding between the public interest as defined by particular and special interests and a public interest that is defined more inclusively. The problem is illustrated in this question: Should I do what is best for my constituents, section, area, region, or do I do what is best for the whole city, the whole state, the nation? To answer that question, the role of the democratic community is most crucial!

The conflict between local and larger interests is unavoidable. It is best resolved by finding the links between local and larger interest. There are many local concerns that affect the national interest. Similarly, most national problems have significant local consequences. It has already been noted that the "national" issues in NIF are not just issues of concern to the federal government, but are issues of concern throughout the nation. It follows, then, that the Forums have a special responsibility to identify the local-national connections.

Policymakers who see their responsibility as strictly local may consider it political suicide to be overly concerned with "the big picture." Yet serving the larger, public interest seems quite consistent with the way many understand their responsibilities. They don't think that they are being politically idealistic. The following excerpts are from reports on the way members of Congress see their responsibilities:

The primary concern of members of Congress for their own reelection has become an established part of the literature on Congress, and it has frequently been asserted that this concern impels legislators to stress both legislative and nonlegislative activity that provides local benefits.... [In] a public-opinion survey conducted in 1977... voters were asked whether they thought that their representative

"should be primarily concerned with looking after the needs and interests of 'his own district' or 'the nation as a whole.' They chose 'own district' by a margin of 57 to 34 percent." Remarkably, however, when, as part of the same survey, members of the House were asked a similar question, 45 percent said they were "primarily concerned with looking after the needs and interests of the nation as a whole," while only 24 percent said they were "primarily concerned with looking after the needs and interests of their own districts."[20]

The concept of "the public interest" has been dismissed by most political analysts because it is too imprecise, but in this example it is clear that the concept represents an ideal of importance to many members of Congress:

The concept of public interest is important ... not because of its inherent meaning, but because of its value to members of Congress....

The terms "national interest" and "public interest"... appeal to members of Congress because they are associated with another conception of the legislature, that of a governing body acting in terms of the national interest.... "Ultimately," as one member of the House has pointed out, "you have to govern."[21]

Experienced political leaders, like former Representative Richard Bolling, past chairman of the powerful House Committee on Rules, testify to the practical importance of the democratic community — the public — in helping the government

deal effectively with the tension between local and national interests. He believes that the government is only effective when the public provides a mandate for action in the larger interest. Without a broad public sense of direction and without coalitions of citizens who reflect that sense, legislation becomes fragmented, piecemeal, and special interest oriented, unbalancing the political order.

In summary, public talk seems capable of producing politically relevant information about:

- How basic motivations and perceptions are at play in policy options; what the conflicts are in terms of these convictions about what is most valued by the public; how these values do and don't get integrated into a basis for long-term policies — all in all, the *whys* of public attitudes.

- What options people want to consider that may not be on the established agendas.

- How people understand the interrelations among and within issues, how they approach hard choices and conflicts in their own preferences, how they understand the consequences of those choices and what kinds of trade-offs they are inclined to make.

- What considerations facilitate or block the public's progress in working through issues and how far along the public is in doing the work of the democratic community. (On some issues the public will have come to definite conclusions; on others people may be unsure of what their choices are or they may try to escape making hard decisions.)

- Where interests converge and diverge, what interests are shareable, and what constitutes the larger public interest.

- The difference between majority opinion, in the aggregate, and the form that a more integrated, shared, and reflective public judgment might take.

- The difference between what people would prefer as individuals (what people want) and what they think is best for their community or nation.

- The difference between what people say to each other about an issue when they are talking "laterally" that they will not say when talking "vertically" to policymakers.

and finally...

- The standards that people hold for governments and the directions they believe the country should take.

In concluding this section, there is one caveat that should be discussed. Perhaps it is not just a different kind of information coming from the Forums that promises a better way for citizens and policymakers to work together. Perhaps it is the habits they develop for talking to each other. Talking in terms of values (things of widespread and fundamental importance), the larger public interest, and long-term policy — all of this has the potential for building a different kind of relationship between citizens and policymakers. The potential for a more satisfactory relationship may be the most significant feature of the Forums for decision makers. At one of the annual meetings of policy leaders and citizens from the Forums, Rob Nelson of the *Christian Science Monitor* led a discussion on the common political tasks that each of these two groups faced — making hard choices and finding the common ground. It was a revelation on both sides to see the way the public and

government officials each went about similar political tasks. The discussion made for a different relationship among the participants. Citizens may, some studies suggest, put a greater premium on the type of relationship they have with officials than on whether they agree with them on every issue. The key to the relationship is whether the parties talk "to" or "with" one another.[22]

Changes in Policymaking — Implications for the Public

Today, both policymaking and the role of the public in the making of policy are changing.

Columnist Richard Reeves reflects on the changing role of the public in foreign policy, but his observations apply to a wide variety of issues on which there has been one very substantial change — the growing unwillingness of the public to defer to a policy establishment. He quotes Harvard professor of government, Stanley Hoffman:

> *"There is a foreign policy/security community which lives in a not particularly magic circle of its own."*
>
> *How many people are in that community? How many people actually control American foreign policy? "A few thousand," Hoffman said. "I think the group has expanded over the years. But it could be two thousand, three thousand...." I asked the same question, months later, of former President Nixon.*
>
> *"Very few," he said. "Two thousand? Three thousand...."*
>
> *The key to that kind of leadership as the United States became ... more open was control of*

information. Presidents and allied elites had controlled foreign policy by controlling the flow of information from abroad — until technology began distributing facts, opinions, and pictures indiscriminately.[23]

With this change, Reeves believes, has come a shift in the way policy is made. He goes on to recount what happened when people realized that they were getting briefed by television broadcasts just as the President was. In a sense, people all became "little Presidents." Our country, Reeves maintains, is becoming more and more a direct democracy but one "writhing within the framework and traditions of a republic." The results are that while we call for strong representatives in government, we are not so willing to defer to their judgment or to put our well-being entirely in their hands.

Science, Technology, and the Public

In addition to this expanding public sensitivity, the nature of the issues on the political agenda themselves may be changing. It is tempting to say that new issues are more complex. It is more accurate to say that they are intermeshed and crosscutting, certainly not contained within an academic category or a geographic boundary. We also have more issues — issues that were not formerly on the political agenda but have now been drawn in from the family, the community, and the laboratories.

For example, the regulation of recombinant DNA research is a policy issue, and needless to say, a complex technical issue. DNA stands for deoxyribonucleic acid, a complex term in itself. And the politics of that acid are as intricate as the DNA strands themselves. A century ago, we might have left such an issue to scientists. Today we have had a public uproar because of the difficult problems involved in deciding on DNA research policy. The problem with DNA, briefly stated, is that

we can do wonderful things by putting genes together. We can attend to genetic disorders and dreaded diseases like diabetes. But we might also produce a new organism in the labs for which there are no controls, a form of life new to this planet. Or we may only be accelerating the mutations that occur naturally. It is such a question that has made this laboratory issue a public issue, an issue where the stakes are so high that the public has been unwilling to allow scientists the final word.

The country is now full of problems of this sort. And these issues are finding their way onto the NIF agenda in Forums on environment, health, and agriculture policy.

The difficulties of making sound public policy are exacerbated because so many policy issues now turn on scientific and technical considerations. Should the scientists decide these issues or should the public? And if the answer is the public, do we propose to make everyone an expert in science? Or does this outlook obscure a more important one, namely, how are we to understand the difference between the respective roles of scientists and citizens?

Gerald Holton, physicist and historian of science at Harvard University, points out that "the fates of science, technology, and society have become linked in ever more-complex ways, each of the three being shaped as much by the other two as by its own dynamics. By a recent estimate, nearly half the Bills before the U.S. Congress have a substantial science/technology component."[24]

Kenneth Prewitt, vice-president for programs at the Rockefeller Foundation, describes the problems a scientific society creates for democratic practice. In a word, public affairs can cease to be public:

Because the average citizen lives a life far removed from the political, economic, cultural, and technical centers that give direction to society, it has always been a theoretical and practical challenge to ensure that the participatory rights bestowed by democracy will be meaningfully exercised. When

the directing centers of society are not within the comprehension of the average citizen, public affairs cease to be public and thus slip out from under lay control.[25]

The rather automatic response to the difficulty citizens have in comprehending very technical data is to teach them more science. But Leon Trachtman, professor of communications at Purdue University, argues that this effort may not be the solution:

I do not, of course, suggest that interested laymen not inform themselves about science any more than they not inform themselves about Renaissance madrigals, nonobjective art, or Greek tragedy. I do, however, raise the question of whether a variety of institutions and organizations should adopt as specific policies the goal of interpreting science and technology to the general public; I will suggest that there are occasions on which efforts to increase public understanding of science may not only fail to be socially constructive but actually be damaging.[26]

It may make more sense to provide citizens with a "civic science literacy" than to expect everyone to become well versed in all the sciences. The reason would be that political questions are questions about what *should be done* in the interest of a diverse community. Benjamin Shen, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, argues for the citizens' right to decide these "should" issues of policy:

The aim of civic science literacy is precisely to enable the citizen to become more aware of science

and science-related issues so that he and his representatives would not shy away from bringing their common sense to bear upon such issues and thus participate more fully in the democratic processes of an increasingly technological society. It is not sufficient to leave decisions on science-related issues to experts if for no other reason than that experts are not popularly elected. To be sure, how *a technical project is implemented is mainly a job for experts, but the more basic decision of* whether *a project is to be undertaken must rest with citizens and their representatives.*[27]

In the past, scientifically related issues have seemed to be issues that affected ways of maximizing our gains in the short run. But Edward Wenk, former presidential science advisor, argues that a cultural shift took place in the 1960s that changed our focus from the maximizing of gains — "Can we do it?" — to the fundamental question of policy — "Ought we do it?"

The Forums should provide an atmosphere conducive to working on issues that intertwine scientific considerations and policy; the emphasis of the Forum is on understanding questions of fact in terms of related values and on thinking through interrelations and consequences. Without opportunities in public forums of this sort, the strains on the policymaking system are likely to become even greater.

But if the legitimacy (or the inevitability) of the public's role in scientific matters is accepted, the next question is whether the public is up to the task. There is some indication that the public is more capable of making sound judgments on scientific issues than it is given credit for. The evidence comes from a pilot study conducted at Harvard by John Doble of the Public Agenda Foundation and Professor Holton. Seventy participants, statistically representative of the general public, were polled for their opinions on a number of scientific research projects involving complex technical issues. Six groups of about a dozen participants each were then given

information about the projects and took part in a substantial discussion of each project. When participants were polled at the end of the meetings for their judgment on the projects, their initial opinions had changed significantly. From their analysis of these changes, Doble and Holton came to the following conclusions:

First, the public's ability to understand and evaluate the importance of technically complex scientific research proposals has indeed been underestimated.

Second, there were surprisingly few differences between the judgments of those who were knowledgeable about science and those who were not, once they all had a chance to reflect on and talk about the questions.

Third, and perhaps most important, the public, as represented by these citizens, firmly believed it had the right to be involved in establishing the criteria by which the impact of science and technology is to be judged. People were not willing to let experts alone decide which risks were acceptable and which benefits should receive priority.

If citizens do defer less to experts — whether on foreign affairs or on science-related issues — the way citizens and policymakers relate to one another will be affected. For example, for both the public and policymakers, choosing which experts to believe will become more of a political issue. Experts may not have the final word. But no one should expect or want them to have no word at all. Furthermore, questions of acceptable risk, not so critical in other issues, will be paramount on science-related issues. Who gets to define acceptable risks where the people making the decisions and the people actually at risk are not the same? Or consider the dilemmas that arise when scientists' preference for "maybe" answers runs head-on into a political system that has to decide "yes" or "no" — and make decisions more quickly than the pace of research might dictate.

Difficult Choices: Limits and Restraints

Another change in the policymaking environment that we now face involves the matter of sacrifices, accepting limits and restraints.

The 1980s are shaping up as a significantly different kind of decade from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Even though those decades were different from each other, they shared one characteristic: up to the mid and late 70s, most of the trends were up.... Practically everyone expected to be a little bit better off each year than the year before. Most people assumed that a rich country like ours could *do what it* should *be doing for its people....*

Now rather suddenly, the 1980s are moving in the opposite direction. ... People sense that their standard of living is going to remain stagnant or decline.[28]

If there are decisions to be made about "sharing the pain rather than the gain," as Daniel Yankelovich describes the dilemma, these decisions will also strain the social fabric and test our cohesion as a society. People don't like to give up what they have, and they feel a sense of injustice when they're asked to do so.

Questions of sharing sacrifices make choice work a very painful exercise. They give rise to a very human reaction, the tendency to deny that the problem is real. Choices based on denials of reality result in dubious conclusions. The public reaction to the oil embargo and gas shortage a few years ago illustrates what can happen.

Long lines at neighborhood gas stations provided vivid evidence that something had happened, yet many people remained unconvinced that there were real shortages. Because information from different sources was contradictory or incomplete, it was difficult for the public to come to a common definition of what, exactly, the problem was. And

so the public reaction was a volatile mixture of outright denial of shortages, combined with a tendency to look for scapegoats, to grasp at straws. As fuel prices rose, people were forced to make sacrifices to pay for resources that until recently had been both abundant and cheap. In the absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary, many concluded that they were the victims of "manufactured shortages" — and that public leaders were either unwilling or unable to do anything about the situation. Combined with the suspicion that decisions were being imposed upon them, that mistrust only added to a pervasive sense that a situation that directly affected millions of Americans was essentially out of control.[29]

One of the principal reasons the NIF issue books depict the hard choices that the public has to make is the belief that such choices will be critical to more and more policy questions.

These choices about "sharing the pain" may not only be more common, they may also face us with greater frequency. That pace may be at odds with what a republic requires, "the slow and quiet action of society upon itself."[30]

The Last Word: The Civic and the Civil

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once observed:

The temper and integrity in which a political fight is waged is more important to the health of our society than any particular policy.[31]

This chapter has been about policymaking and the role of the democratic community in relation to democratic government. The attention has been on particular kinds of issues and on the particular problems of making policy decisions concerning those issues. Niebuhr's comment is a useful reminder that what the public does in governing is not limited to influencing substantive issues. The public, the body civic, can also influence the character, the civility of political deliberations.

The Forums may be useful, Keith Melville believes, simply by enabling people to move away from the absolute certainty that sometimes gives rise to uncivility. Such a shift in itself may improve the political environment. Melville's conclusion from watching many Forums is:

> *It's not realistic to expect that Forum participants will be able to reach anything resembling a consensus about what should be done. Part of our problem in conveying the outcome of these Forums to leaders is that there's no clear outcome on most issues, in the sense of a specific solution. Some of the most productive Forums I've attended moved in quite a different direction. At the outset, before many participants grasped the complexities of the issue, there was widespread agreement about a preferred solution. But as discussion continued, participants became more and more uncertain about what should be done. To my mind that is useful.*[32]

A former member of Congress tells an illuminating story of one occasion several years ago when he saw public discussion temper the political hyperbole of the debate over SALT II. His mail was running at least nine to one against the treaty. The tone of the negative letters was scornful, antagonistic, feverish. Then a

community forum in his home district examined both sides of the issue. After the public "talked through" the issue, the Congressman's mail showed the people were still in a clear majority against the treaty. But the tenor of the opposition became decidedly more civil and the quality of the political environment improved.

Such public civility was no small gain. We rail at politicians unreasonably, and they rail at each other unreasonably. When talking only at a distance, instead of one person to another, the language of politics can quickly become moral hyperbole. But talking together, face-to-face, over time, can have a powerful effect. It is difficult to stay angry or to be rude forever. The quality of a political environment no less than the quality of our physical environment may have an intrinsic value, one worthy of its own form of conservation.

1 Adapted from Keith Melville, "Introducing the National Issues Forum," p. 9.

2 This definition of what makes interest common was taken from Jane J. Mansbridge's book, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.

3 Melville, *The Domestic Policy Association: A Report on Its First Year*, p. 5.

4 John Gardner, as cited in National Association of Community Leadership Organizations, *Exploring Leadership*, p. 12.

5 Albert Gore, Jr., adapted from remarks made at the National Issues Forums' Washington Week, May 1985.

6 Richardson, "We Delegated Our Powers," p. 5.

7 Arthur Maass, *Congress and the Common Good*, p. 3.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, p. 3.

10 *Ibid.*

11 David J. Vogler and Sidney R. Waldman, *Congress and Democracy*, p. 115.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

13 Hubert H. Humphrey, *Commencement Address at Syracuse University*, June 6, 1965.

14 Maass, *Congress and the Common Good*, p. 7.

15 Stephen E. Frantzich, *Computers in Congress*, p. 20.

16 Norman J. Ornstein and David Rhode, "Resource Usage, Information, and Policymaking in the Senate," pp. 309-10.

17 John W. Kingdon, *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*, p. 232.

18 Roger Porter, letter to author, 12 June 1986.

19 Reich, "Policy Making in a Democracy," p. 138.

20 Vogler and Waldman, *Congress and Democracy*, pp. 48-49.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

22 *Ibid.*, *Congress and Democracy*, pp. 27-28.

23 Richard Reeves, "The Democratization of War... and Peace... ," pp. 20, 21.

24 Gerald Holton, "Where Is Science Taking Us?" p. 10.

25 Kenneth Prewitt, "Scientific Illiteracy and Democratic Theory," p. 51.

26 Leon E. Trachtman, "The Public Understanding of Science," p. 42.

27 Benjamin S. P. Shen, "Science Literacy and the Public Understanding of Science," p. 48.

28 Yankelovich, "Information, Judgment and Consensus," p. 25.

29 Melville, "Introducing the National Issues Forum," p. 9.

30 Reeves, *American Journey*, p. 89.

31 Reinhold Niebuhr, as quoted in *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, October 5, 1983.

32 Adapted from Melville, "Guidelines for Productive Community Discussions," p. 11.

CONCLUSION

DO THE FORUMS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Manfred Stanley and his associates at the Center for the Study of Citizenship at Syracuse University have been studying NIF almost from its inception. He has his own description of the concepts underlying the Forums. They serve as an excellent introduction to a summary of the Forums, their aims, and their dynamics.

1. The central task of a civic forum is to help the public discover the public's business. This proposition is understood in sharp contrast with the notion of interest representation. Instead, the emphasis is upon people's common identity as "citizens." ... A sense of the public's business emerges from a discovery process achieved within the forum. It is not something brought to the forum by experts or interest representatives, including those who purport to speak for the "public interest."

2. Forum discourse is not to be grounded ... in any politically partisan position. This proposition follows from the first.... Imposing any partisan perspective as a condition for the forum precludes its basic purpose, the discovery of a collective identity superordinate to faction.

3. A forum should have a double reference: the local community that people call their home, and the greater society that people call their nation. Ideally, a forum is intended to help citizens become aware of the dialectical interdependence of local and national (and, indeed, international) forces.

4. The basic means by which the purposes of the forum are to be achieved is "choice work," the dynamics of choosing between alternative policy orientations that are grounded in the average citizen's values and perspectives....

5. Choice work is best conducted by means of a process called "working through," which moves from an initially impulsive opinion to a considered judgment.... Being forced to choose ... will elicit deep and considered thought, engaging in which will lead people to discover what their values really are.[1]

The Book in Review

The first questions about our political system and our public responsibilities tend to be very personal. They are about the way we understand ourselves and our relation to those who live around us. We are unique individuals and, in America, proudly individualistic. We value our privacy and the freedom to do as we please. But we are also public beings, political creatures. To be a complete human being is to be both public and private. People often think of the two as the antithesis of one

another. But there are those who see the two as corollaries, with the public and private each dependent on the other.

The Forums make a connection between the private and the public. Our public life begins when our personal agendas are joined to our vision of the world as we hope it will be. Moving into the public realm means going from the world of "I want" to the world of "we should." We don't have to give up our individuality or self-interest — we don't even have to agree totally, but we have to agree about how to act on specific policy questions. The public world is no abstraction or ideal. It is the everyday world of doing those things as a community that we cannot do alone. It is so everyday that we lose sight of it between the immediacy of the personal and the massiveness of the government. The public realm is not the world of family or friends. It is too full of strangers to be that. But it is not just the world of government. It is our shared life in all of its forms.

The Forums, as public forums, inevitably raise questions about what the public is — and what it requires of us. What does it mean to participate publicly? People tend to think of participation as a matter of rights — the right to compete for personal advantage. Politics is unquestionably competitive. But for that very reason there is a counterbalancing theory of political participation, not as competing for advantage but as sharing in common efforts. The Forums raise questions about what it means to participate when participation means, as it did originally, "acting as if we belong."

Do the Forums really make a difference? When people ask this question, they usually mean, "Do the Forums have any *political* effect?" By "politics" people often have in mind electing particular officials and passing specific legislation. But, as we have seen, there are broader and more fundamental ways to think about politics. Before we can decide on specifics, we have to set basic directions. What kind of community and country do we want? What mandate are we willing to give the government? Those decisions fall within the undelegable responsibilities of the public. Those are matters "We the People" have to decide. Politics, at its most basic, is making choices about direction, and that is the work of the democratic community.

Choices are difficult because our notions about what is most important conflict. In the real world, we rarely get to choose between options that are either all good or bad. We have to choose among options that pull and tug at our most cherished senses of what is valuable. We have to "work through" those difficulties in policy in much the same way we work through personal difficulties. Working through an issue means coming to terms personally and collectively with the conflicts that are always present when we are deciding on public policies.

When people talk together publicly, they either rely on the facts given to them or they go beyond the facts to find out what those facts mean to different people in different circumstances. There is a kind of information or knowledge that people can develop when they are together that is not possible when they are apart.What *we* know and what *we* think, based on our collective experience is different from what I know individually. This "public" knowledge has to do with interrelations and consequences and how the parts fit into the whole of a political system. People are experts on the public knowledge they produce.

The challenge in the Forums is to integrate various individual perspectives or opinions into more comprehensive perspectives or judgments. The integration of opinions requires more than simply aggregating them to find out which point of view is in the majority.

The Forums can only be a catalyst in the larger debate about public policy. Forums are not all of public talk. No one Forum can establish working through issues as a habit or produce judgments from opinions like rabbits out of a hat. That takes time — and it takes more than one Forum.

The original forums began in communities, and their descendants serve to create political communities out of geographic and demographic communities. Forums are full of talk, but that talk exists to serve essential political purposes for the community. Public talk generates power — the power of ideas, of commitments, of relationships. It can create a willingness to act. Forums in the democratic community do the basic work to make democratic government possible. They are there to help set public standards and directions. They are there to find where common interests arise from particular interests. The civic forums are there

to make the public voice more than an abstraction. They are there to provide unique and essential public information for policymaking. They are public places where citizens and policy officials can fashion a more productive relationship.

Can the Forums make a difference? They certainly can. The principal function of public talk in settings like National Issues Forums is to create the public self — and the PUBLIC itself.

1 Manfred Stanley, "The Centertown Project," pp.7-9.

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